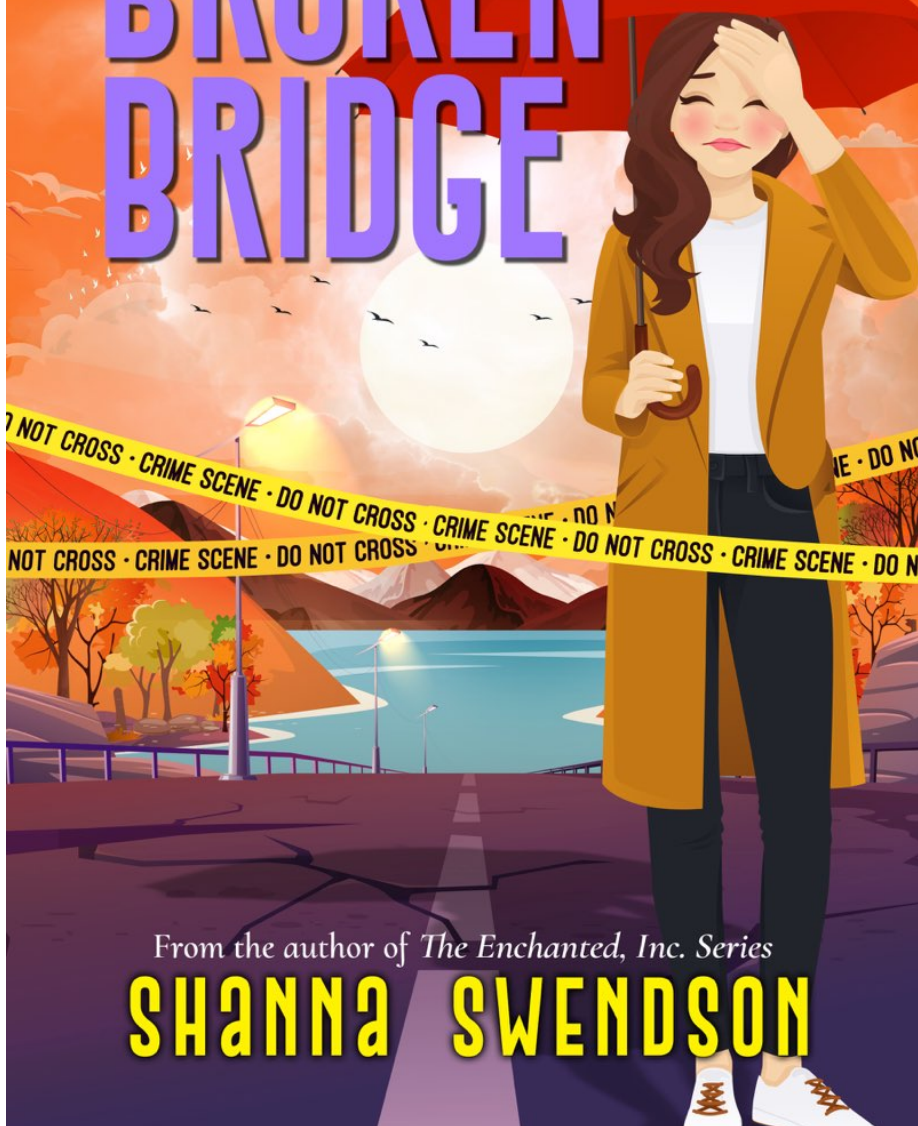


Case of the

BROKEN BRIDGE



From the author of *The Enchanted, Inc. Series*

SHANNA SWENDSON

Case of the Broken Bridge

Shanna Swendson

OceanofPDF.com

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Chapter One

I felt like I was in a ghost town, or perhaps was the sole survivor of humanity in one of those postapocalyptic science fiction movies. There wasn't another person in sight. Even the parking spaces up and down Main Street were empty. No cars came down the road. I wouldn't have been surprised to see a tumbleweed. It would have fit perfectly with the atmosphere of desertion.

But it was the most festive ghost town I'd ever seen. Blue and white ribbons fluttered in the breeze from each lamppost. The words "Go Stirling Mills!" had been painted on the window across the street. It wasn't an order to evacuate. It was a sign of the football fever that had consumed the town. Just about everyone had gone to the game that would determine if our team would make it to the playoffs. I'd learned that things tended to get quiet downtown on Friday nights during football season, but this was the worst I'd seen. If it was this bad for the final regular season game, what would it be like for the playoffs?

The only sign of life was the glowing "open" sign in the window of the Mexican restaurant down the block, and it drew me like a beacon. I was surprised that Margarita's restaurant was open, but I was grateful. If it was a slow night, we'd be able to hang out and chat. Unfortunately, it looked like the movie theater was shuttered for the night, so she couldn't close early and sneak out to see a movie with me. I headed across the street toward the restaurant.

Inside, the place looked like the aftermath of a disaster. Margarita

and one of her waitresses were busy cleaning up from what must have been a big party. Several tables were pushed together, with a couple of high chairs mixed among the seats, and the debris from the meal's aftermath was surrounded by puddles of soda that dripped off the table onto the floor.

"Wow, I'd have expected tonight to be quiet," I said.

"The rest of the night will be," Margarita said, glancing up from piling dishes into a plastic tub. "But there was a huge rush before people headed off to the game. And then there were the young families who didn't go to the game who needed a place to go when everywhere else was closed, other than the chain places on the highway." She shuddered at the thought, and I joined her.

"I guess that's why you didn't close."

"I figured I'd have enough business to make it worthwhile. Plus, I couldn't get tickets. I'm surprised you aren't at the news event of the week."

"I only got two press passes, and I figured it was best to give them to people who could actually cover the game. I sent a sports reporter and a photographer. Part of being an editor is knowing when to delegate, and writing about football isn't one of my strengths."

"And you didn't really want to go."

"And I didn't really want to go," I admitted. I'd been to a few home games as someone's guest—you just about had to inherit season tickets or be related to a player to get in, and they were stingy with press passes—so I appreciated the way the sport brought the whole town together, but it was hard to get too excited about teenagers I didn't know playing a game I didn't really care about. "I figure I can go to some of the playoff games, if we make it."

"*When* we make it," she corrected.

“When we make it. That’s if I can get either a press pass or a ticket.”

“Once we get past the first round, the games tend to be held in bigger stadiums, so you may be able to get in.”

“That’s something to look forward to,” I said dryly. I twined my first two fingers around each other and held them up. “Fingers crossed.”

“If the team knew about your luck, they’d make sure you were there.”

“It’s not that kind of luck. I tend to be present when news events happen, which means it’s bad luck for the people around me. If I’m at the game, there will be something big for me to write about, like a major injury to a player or someone in the stands, a shootout in the parking lot, or a bomb threat.”

“Then maybe they should keep you away. Anyway, I’m glad you’re here to keep me company tonight now that the families have cleared out. Have a seat, and I’ll get you a drink and some chips in a moment. I need to get this cleaned up before the soda soaks into the floor and gets sticky.”

“No rush,” I said, heading toward my usual seat at the big wooden bar that was right out of an old-timey saloon, which this building once had been. “Finish up what you’re doing. I need to work up a bigger appetite.” I paused and turned back. “I can help if you want. I worked in a restaurant in college, so I know the drill.”

“Let her!” Josie, the waitress, said, shooting a grin at me.

“Okay, then, if you don’t mind,” Margarita said. “But if you help, then dinner’s on me.”

“How about a drink on you?” I said. “And throw in some queso. I don’t think five minutes of work is worth a whole dinner.”

“You can load up the bus tubs with dishes and put the tubs on the

bar. I'll take it from there." She shook her head. "I need to hire some dishwashers who aren't related to anyone on the football team."

"You don't have to give everyone the night off," Josie pointed out.

"Yeah, but that's why I'm a great boss. Nobody's quit because they can't go to the game."

"It's that big a deal?" I asked as I piled plates in the tub. There were remnants of brightly colored icing on some of the plates, so there must have been a birthday party. That explained the mess.

"Yeah, especially if the player is a senior. If we don't win" —she crossed herself—"it could be his last game, and the whole family wants to be there for that."

"And for some of these guys, this will be the peak of their existence, as they never see that kind of glory again," Josie muttered.

"Did they not have football at your school?" Margarita asked me.

"I mostly went to school overseas. There was a football team, but it wasn't that big a deal. It was just a dependent youth activity, not connected to the school. We also didn't have extended family around. Your cousins and aunts and uncles were on a different continent, so the only people who really cared were the players' parents and maybe their close friends. I never went to a game."

"That's so sad," Josie said, pausing as she wiped a table. "And, yeah, I know I was just scoffing at how important this town thinks football is, but there has to be a middle ground. It's also sad not having your family around."

"I guess," I said with a shrug. "But I was also living where we could take a quick weekend trip to London or Paris, so there's that."

"I think that more than balances it out," Margarita said with a laugh. "I'd trade football games for Paris."

With the three of us working, we quickly got the dining room back to looking like it usually did. Margarita put the dishes in the dishwasher and came back to the bar with a pitcher of margaritas. She couldn't sell the drinks, thanks to local laws that I hoped to help get changed, but nothing stopped her from giving drinks to friends. That was one reason I liked slow nights. She didn't have to worry about everyone else in the restaurant seeing a drink and wanting one.

"Your latest issue was really something," she said as the two of us enjoyed margaritas and chips with hot cheese dip.

"It helps to be on the scene for a murder and trapped with a murderer," I said with a casual shrug. "As I said, that's how my luck works."

"The guy had been living in the attic for months," she reminded me. "You being there didn't bring him there."

"But he emerged from his hiding place when I was there."

"Because the house was full of ghost hunters who went snooping. You just happened to be invited to the event."

"Okay, so maybe this one wasn't due to my knack for being on the scene."

"We'll have to plan a girls' weekend trip that's not about a news event and see what happens."

"You'll regret it," I warned.

"We shall see." She leaned closer over the bar. "Speaking of aftermath from last weekend, have there been any other developments?"

I managed to keep my expression neutral as I said, "I wasn't considered a victim, and there were plenty of other witnesses, so I didn't have to deal with too much paperwork."

“That wasn’t what I meant, and you know it.”

How did she know what Wes Mosby and I had discussed in the immediate aftermath? No one else had been around when we’d admitted to some attraction and talked about doing something about it. “What did you mean?” I asked after taking a sip of my drink.

“Come on, the man drove through a storm to get to you when he learned you might be in danger.”

“That wasn’t about me. He’s a cop, through and through, so when he learned there was a crisis, he showed up, even if it was outside his jurisdiction.” It was admirable, but I suspected it might become a problem if anything ever did actually happen between us. Which it hadn’t in the week since we’d been trapped in a haunted house with a murderer. I hadn’t seen him at all, hadn’t heard from him other than a couple of short text messages. I didn’t know if he’d changed his mind or if there was something else going on.

“Well, speak of the devil,” Margarita murmured with a sly smile, and I turned to see Wes standing in the doorway, surveying the restaurant. He was in uniform, so he could have been on duty and looking for a fugitive, or he might have just been making sure the restaurant wasn’t too crowded before he committed to coming in for dinner after work. Like many people in Stirling Mills, Wes had an uncanny gift. His involved being able to hear people’s thoughts, so he tended to avoid crowds. Supposedly, he had trouble reading me, possibly due to my own ability to see ghosts, which led to me having some psychic barriers that kept me from constantly being besieged by the dead, but I still felt a bit self-conscious around him.

And that was even worse at the moment. He was just as cute as I remembered, tall and lean in his khaki uniform, and with his greenish eyes and wavy auburn hair. I thought he smiled a bit when he saw me,

though that could have been merely about being relieved to find the restaurant all but empty. I tried to shut up the thoughts in my head as he approached and took the seat next to me.

“Ah, a nice, quiet night,” he said.

“I’m surprised you aren’t on escort duty for the team buses,” Margarita said, placing a glass in front of him and lifting the margarita pitcher.

He held out a hand to cover the glass. “None for me tonight. I’m still on call. The chief decided it was an important part of his leadership position in the town for him to represent the department at the game, so he left me in charge of the department while he’s gone.”

“But he’s not even from this town,” I said as Margarita poured him a glass of ice water. “He has no connections to anyone on the team. You probably know everyone in the team, cheerleading squad, and marching band.”

“Yeah, well.” He shrugged. “I actually don’t mind. If I’d used the pass he got, I’d have been in the stadium, where things can get pretty intense.” I could only imagine what a mind reader would overhear at a football game. “With escort duty, I’d be left standing around by the team and band buses through the whole game, which is not my idea of fun. I’d much rather be left behind in an empty town.”

“Away games must be like Christmas for you,” I said.

An expression of sheer bliss crossed his face. “Oh yeah. And playoff games are even better. Those stadiums are bigger, so even more people go. There’s nobody left in town. I mostly just do some patrols to make sure no one’s taking advantage of everyone being gone, and I can go out to dinner during prime dinner hours.”

He sounded perfectly relaxed, completely at ease and not at all like a man who was seeing a woman he was attracted to for the first time

since confessing his attraction and suggesting they might want to do something together. He must have had a much better poker face than I could imagine because my heart was racing, my legs were trembling, and I was pretty sure I'd turned bright red upon seeing him. Or else his feelings weren't as intense as mine were.

"Good week, Lex?" he asked me.

"Yeah, I guess," I said as I tried to think of a way to ask where he'd been without sounding like I was whining. Saying something like, "Why haven't you called me? I thought you said you liked me," would have been a real turnoff. I settled for a casual, "You? Busy?"

He heaved a deep sigh. "Oh, yeah. I've got a new appreciation for what crime victims go through. Since that guy hit me and tied me up, they're treating me like a victim in this case, and that means statements and interviews and tons of paperwork. It's been a lot worse than the part where I actually got hit on the head. I wasn't all that traumatized, but reliving it so many times hasn't been fun—and we haven't even made it to a trial."

I was glad I hadn't made any remark about him being scarce this week since it turned out he had a valid excuse. He really had been busy, with a lot to deal with emotionally. I didn't think our relationship—if you could even call it that at this point—was yet one where I could be a shoulder for him to lean on during a difficult time, so it made sense for him to have needed time on his own to deal with everything, in addition to the time on top of his regular duties it took to take care of the official stuff.

"I guess it's even worse than being a witness," I said.

"They aren't sure they'll be able to make a murder charge stick, so they're relying on the assault cases on the photographer and me to make sure he stays in prison. Of course, this is all on top of the

sentence he was already serving and the escape.”

“They can’t make that murder charge stick?”

“There’s not a lot of physical evidence, and a good lawyer might be able to raise reasonable doubt, since he lived in that attic for months and that could explain his DNA being up there. They might be able to tie him to the wrench and tie the wrench to the murder, but it’ll come down to what his lawyer would say and how the jury would take it. So, it seems I’m the star witness.”

“Surely that’s not a new role for you. You must have to testify all the time.”

“Yeah, but as a cop, not as a crime victim. They may try to use my position to add credibility to my testimony, and I’m sure they’ll have me come to trial in uniform. That’s if it goes to trial. They may get him to take a plea, but first we’ve got to get past a grand jury.” He suddenly froze for a moment, then said, “This isn’t for publication, by the way. I should have said that up front.”

It hadn’t even crossed my mind, though it might have made an interesting story. “I thought we were talking as friends,” I said stiffly. “Do you really think I’d go to press with something you said to me in casual conversation?” Maybe it was for the best that we hadn’t actually moved our relationship along. The town’s newspaper editor and de facto police chief (since Wes did most of the real chief’s work) would always have some conflict and wariness with each other. How could we have any kind of pillow talk if he felt the need to tell me what he said wasn’t for publication? Not that there was likely to be any pillow talk if we couldn’t even talk in a restaurant.

He looked down at the bar and adjusted his water glass. “Well, no. But better safe than sorry. It could torpedo the case if inside info made it into print.”

“Have I ever printed something you said to me in conversation?”

“I guess not. But it did happen with your predecessor.”

“I’m not him.”

He gave me a sidelong glance and a sly smile. “Obviously. And thank goodness.”

“I want to make a life in this town, and I can’t do that if I burn bridges by betraying people’s trust. How about we make a deal, and anything you say to me outside of an obvious work situation is considered off the record unless you specify otherwise?”

“What do you mean by obvious work situation?”

“When we’re interacting in the line of duty, like if I’m interviewing you at a crime scene or at your office or if you’re coming to me to get information related to a case. This” —I gestured around the restaurant — “is neutral territory. Nothing said here goes into print unless specified otherwise. We can add other places to our list of neutral ground as we go.”

Nodding, he said, “Okay, I can live with that. Deal.” He stuck his hand out for me to shake. I could think of other ways we could have sealed the deal, but I supposed we’d have to work up to that.

Margarita, who’d quietly made herself scarce while we were talking, returned from the kitchen. “Are you two ready to order?” she asked.

We told her what we wanted, and he added, “Put them both on my check.”

She gave me a quick glance and quirked an eyebrow before saying, “Then this’ll be the cheapest date ever because Lexie’s meal was already on the house, since I put her to work this evening.” She looked back at me, as though daring me to say that I’d only agreed to a drink and some queso dip as payment for my help. If it meant having to put

my meal on Wes's tab otherwise, I'd have to accept her generosity.

"Oh. Then I guess I'll have to treat some other time," he said with a shrug. I noticed that he didn't argue with her calling it a date. This situation gave me flashbacks to awkward ambiguous friendships in college, when I wasn't sure whether we were just hanging out or if it was something else, and there was evidence for both possibilities. As I recalled, my guesses had always turned out to be wrong, sometimes with embarrassing results.

"Yeah, some other time," I said with a smile I hoped looked neutral rather than desperately hopeful.

"Are you busy tomorrow?"

Okay, that was fast. This was actually looking good. I knew all the dating guides said to be "busy" for short-notice invitations so the guy didn't think you were too available, but he knew me too well, and this was a small enough town that he'd know I was lying about any news events I said I had to cover. "No, not really. Why?"

"Are you up for doing something in the early afternoon, say around lunchtime?"

"Sure, I guess."

"Good. Wear something for the outdoors."

"Okay," I said warily. It was November, but it was also Texas, which meant this was the time of year when you could actually be outdoors in daytime without bursting into flames. Early November in Texas was like summer in some of the places I'd lived as a kid. This was when we did stuff like picnics and hikes. Was he planning a picnic? That could be romantic. "What do you have in mind?"

"There's something I'd like to show you. How about I pick you up at your place at noon?"

Chapter Two

A little before noon on Saturday, I waited in front of the newspaper office. Wes had remained cryptic about what we were going to do, so I'd planned my outfit to land somewhere between practical and cute. I wore jeans, hiking boots, a nice top, and a chunky cardigan sweater. I looked like something out of a scene from one of the "autumn festival" romantic movies I'd been binge-watching lately. I pictured Wes joining me in that scene, wearing jeans and a fisherman's sweater, the two of us lounging on a big plaid blanket with a picnic basket.

"Someone has big plans," a nearby voice remarked. I turned to see the shadowy figure of a woman dressed like a girl reporter in an old movie lurking just outside the office door. I wasn't sure how far Jean Jacobs, the paper's former editor, could get from the building, but I should have known I couldn't get away from the office without her noticing. She haunted the newspaper building and liked to think she still ran the place.

"I wouldn't say 'big,'" I replied. "There's just something Wes wants me to look at. He'll be picking me up soon."

She scanned me head to toe and shook her head. "True, no self-respecting woman would have dressed like that for a date back in my day, but I understand that you people are far more casual, and this is not the way you usually dress on a Saturday. You think it's a date."

That picture of Wes and me on a picnic blanket popped into my mind again, and I shook my head to remove the mental image. This

was reality, not a movie, and getting my hopes up was bound to lead to disappointment. "I don't know what it is," I admitted. "He just asked if I was busy, then set a time that coincides with a meal time. It's ambiguous." Frustratingly so. I hadn't told Jean about the conversation we'd had a week earlier about our possible feelings for each other, and I didn't intend to.

"Getting involved with him isn't a good idea," she said.

"Why? Is there something I don't know about him?"

"What is there to know? He's a cop who more or less runs the police department and is sure to be chief someday, and you're the newspaper editor. That's a pretty big conflict of interest. If you're doing your job right, you're bound to end up on opposite sides of an issue. You'll be calling his department to account. He'll be trying to keep things quiet. And even if you two manage to keep your feelings out of your work, and vice versa, if people in town know you're involved, they're going to wonder how your personal lives are affecting your work. You're the one whose credibility will be questioned. People here have known him his whole life, so they're more likely to give him the benefit of the doubt. But they'll wonder about you."

I couldn't help but think about the argument we'd had the night before about whether or not he could trust me not to print things he said in casual conversation, and I knew she had a point. Not that I wanted to admit that. Telling Jean she was right about something meant never hearing the end of it. "So I can't date anyone in town without compromising my credibility?"

"You notice that I never married."

"I thought you were mostly married to the newspaper. And possibly a bit intimidating to men of your generation."

"That, too. In my day, I'd have been expected to quit work as soon

as I got married, or at least as soon as I had a kid. I wasn't playing that game."

"It's different now."

"So you just have to worry about conflict of interest. Get yourself a man who's not likely to find himself mentioned in the newspaper until his obituary."

"Isn't that what they used to say about women, that a lady's name should only be in the newspaper when she was born, when she got married, and when she died?"

"Yep. And it should work both ways. There are plenty of men in this town who aren't likely to end up at the heart of a story."

"Yeah, and I haven't met any of them because they don't do anything interesting."

"They also don't commit or solve crimes."

"Well, I'm not sure this is a date. It could be work-related. He may have a story tip for me."

"Which is why dating him is a bad idea. You don't want it to look like you're getting the inside scoop because you're sleeping with him."

"I'm not sleeping with him. We occasionally sit next to each other at dinner. That's all." So far.

Whatever glow of anticipation I'd had when I got dressed, this conversation had doused it. My hazy picnic daydream evaporated like morning fog when the sun hit it. Even so, I couldn't stop my heart from racing a little when I saw Wes's truck approaching. He was driving his personal vehicle, which was basically the same as his police SUV, just with a different paint job and without the rack of lights on the roof.

"Keep it that way. Good luck."

"Thanks," I said, softly adding, "For nothing," before I went around

to the passenger side to climb in.

It was a good thing I'd adjusted my expectations because there was no fisherman's sweater in sight, just a T-shirt and a hooded sweatshirt. Pity. With his coloring, he'd look amazing in one of those sweaters. If we ever did start dating seriously enough for expensive gifts, I'd have to give him one. And then he'd have about two days every other year when it was cold enough to wear it. Not that he looked bad. He was quite dashing in uniform with his wavy hair tamed, but he was also pretty adorable slightly ruffled, the faintest hint of reddish shadow on his jaw, in casual clothes. But the fact that he hadn't shaved and was dressed down was a good sign that this wasn't meant to be a date. Or maybe he was trying to make it look like it wasn't one.

"So, where are you taking me?" I asked, hoping his answer would give me more of a clue.

"Have you had lunch?"

My hopes rose slightly. "No. You said noon, so I figured lunch might be on the agenda."

He reached to the back seat, grabbed a paper fast-food bag, and handed it to me. "That's what I figured. Here you go. I guessed at what you'd like." I could already smell a hamburger and fries, even before I opened the bag. While I loved the imagery of a picnic with crusty bread and cheese, I had to admit that this was more to my taste. My rejoicing tastebuds balanced my disappointed heart. "Go ahead and eat. I ate mine while I was driving over here. That drink in the right cupholder is yours. I don't remember ever seeing you drink soda, so I got you an iced tea, unsweetened. They didn't have hot tea."

"That wouldn't have gone well with a hamburger. Unsweetened iced tea is good." If we weren't actually eating together, it felt less like a date. On the other hand, he had bought my meal, and he'd actually

thought about what I might like, making some pretty accurate guesses based on what he'd observed about me. I didn't share my addiction to made-for-TV romantic comedies with many people, so he had no way of knowing about my picnic fantasies. And in all those movies, the guy knowing what to order for the woman was depicted as a sign that he might be The One. But that was something to worry about later. I didn't want my burger and fries getting cold, so I dug in, hoping I wasn't getting ketchup and mustard on my face.

While I ate, he drove out of town and turned on to the River Road. I shuddered at the memory of the accident that had happened there earlier in the year and the ghosts I'd encountered along the way. Being able to see and talk to ghosts could sometimes be valuable in my line of work, but that didn't mean it was always pleasant. I was used to Jean and had mostly stopped thinking about her as a ghost. Other ghosts were often more unsettling.

"Looks like that new development out here isn't going to go through," I remarked. "All the real estate signs are down."

"Yep. Thanks to you, all these people were able to keep their property. I think a couple did end up selling, but it looks like other farmers bought it instead of it being turned into a suburban tract."

"I guess that's good." I wasn't anti-progress. I was just against old people being cheated by slick-talking developers. If someone who knew what they were doing and had accurate information chose to sell to someone who wanted to fill a former farm with houses, that was their business.

A few miles down the road, the river curved but the road remained straight, so it was farther from the river and there was land between the road and the river. We soon came to a crossroads. There was a sign saying "bridge out" blocking the other road between us and the river.

“Oh, this is that bridge that washed out in the storm last weekend,” I said. “I ran a piece about that. They think someone died because their car was on the bridge at the time.” The car had washed up downstream, and the victim’s family had said the bridge was on her route home, so it was a reasonable assumption that she’d been on the bridge when it collapsed.

“Yeah.” He surprised me by turning on to that road. He drove up to the sign, put his truck in park, got out and moved the sign, got back in, and drove past it before stopping again and moving it back into place.

When he was back in the truck, I said, “You did notice that the sign said the bridge was out.”

“Yep.”

“So there’s not really anywhere to go from here. Unless you’re planning to jump the river, and I don’t think you can do that in this truck, no matter what happens in the movies.”

“We don’t need to cross the river.”

I started to think that one end of a washed-out bridge was an odd place to have a picnic, then glanced at the remains of the fast-food meal in my lap and remembered that there would be no picnic. But it occurred to me that a road that was closed to traffic would be nice and private. If you wanted to go somewhere you wouldn’t be disturbed, this would be the place to go. We were hardly teenagers needing a private place to make out, though. We each had our own homes (though mine came with a nosy ghost). We didn’t need to find an isolated lovers’ lane if that kind of activity was what he had in mind, unless perhaps this was about what Jean had said about public perception, and it would look bad for us to be at each other’s places. Still, I was pretty sure he was up to something else.

There was yet another “bridge out” sign ahead, in case someone had

ignored the first one, and he stopped in front of it and turned off the engine. I took the cue to stuff everything from my lunch into the paper bag and set it on the floorboard before I unfastened my seatbelt and got out of the truck. We walked to the sign, beyond which the bridge was most definitely out. The road extended a few yards out over the river before abruptly ending. Some bits of metal and concrete dangled toward the river below. It looked about the same on the other side. I was no engineer, but I got the impression that the pylons in the middle of the river had been knocked out by the rushing waters, taking the middle of the bridge with them.

“So, what do you think?” Wes asked.

“This is a new bridge, right?” I said. The bits of twisted metal were still shiny, not yet rusted, and the remaining concrete was plain and utilitarian, without the fancy carvings I’d seen on other bridges nearby.

“Yeah, only a few years old. It was built to replace that one.” He pointed upstream, where an old steel girder bridge still stood. It was rusted, and I wasn’t sure I’d want to drive across it in anything heavier than a golf cart, but it was standing, which was more than you could say for the new bridge. “They’d had to limit weight, and that meant trucks had to go around to the nearest other bridge until they built this one and rerouted the road. Do you find it odd that the hundred-year-old bridge upstream is still standing and the brand-new one fell?”

“They don’t make ’em like they used to, I guess.”

“Some of the craftsmanship may be different today, but with the computer-assisted design and high-tech materials we have now, you’d think the new bridge would be at least as sturdy as one built a century earlier.”

“Yeah. There weren’t any other bridges washed out, were there?”

“Nope. Look at this.” He guided me closer to the river’s edge,

moving downstream. It looked to me like the remains of the part of the bridge that had been washed out hadn't made it very far. The pylon was lying partially submerged in the river, the water flowing around it. There were chunks of concrete and twisted metal dotting the banks.

"If there was a raging torrent washing out everything in its path, wouldn't the debris have been washed farther downstream?"

"You'd think, wouldn't you? When there have been bad flash floods, they've wiped out everything in their path, with all the debris making it worse and worse downstream, taking out bridges and even houses that are close to the creek or river banks. Not like this."

"You think there was something shady going on?" I asked, getting the tingle I usually felt when I thought there might be a good story.

"Don't you?"

"I definitely don't think it looks like a flash flood can really be blamed, other than maybe triggering a problem that was already a ticking time bomb. But I'm no expert."

"And yet, the official explanation so far is that it was just a flash flood due to the severe storm."

"Won't there be an investigation? Isn't that standard when there's an infrastructure failure like this, especially when there's a death?"

"I'm sure it'll be investigated, but I get the impression the county people would rather not delve into this too deeply. If the Feds get involved, then maybe they'd find something. If it stays at the county level, then the people investigating might be the people who did whatever made this bridge not hold up. Even if it makes it to the state level, the county people might have cronies and can get things hushed up with a hefty campaign donation. This is a county road, so I'm not sure the federal government will get involved unless they have good reason to do so."

“Have you looked into it?”

He shrugged. “Out of my jurisdiction. We’re out of the city limits, and I’m not sure who I can trust at the county level. But if something drew attention to the situation, then the right people might get involved.” He paused, then glanced at me and gave a slight smile. “You know, something like a newspaper article.”

So, this was work, not a date. On the other hand, he was giving me a story and actually asking me to get involved instead of trying to keep me out of it, like he usually did. This was as good as a dozen red roses. Either we both spoke the same love language or he was doing a really good job of figuring out what mine was and giving me something I’d love: a story I could really dig into and expose wrongdoing.

Unless this wasn’t romantic at all and was purely work, this was the most romantic thing anyone had ever done for me. Throw in the burger and fries, and this might just be the best date I’d ever had, even if it wasn’t really a date.

I turned to face Wes. “Let me get this straight: You’re actually inviting me—*asking* me—to involve myself in an investigation? You’re not warning me to stay out of this? I want to get this on the record. And I’ll probably write it in my calendar so I can remember this momentous day.”

“Like I said, it’s not my jurisdiction, not my investigation. It’s something I feel needs to be set right, and I know that you’re a person who loves to set things right.”

It seemed he really did get me, which was gratifying. “You haven’t talked to anyone at the county?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. I didn’t want to put anyone on alert. And, as much as I hate it, I have to stay on good terms with those people.”

“And I don’t?”

“I think it’s less of a concern for your day-to-day life and work than it is for me.”

“Okay, then, I’ll check in with the county engineer on Monday. I think a follow-up story on the bridge and how long traffic will have to be rerouted would be expected, whether or not I suspect anything fishy.” Speaking of fishing, I was still curious as to whether this was really just about him wanting to see justice about the bridge or if it was meant as a romantic offering, so I said, “You know, you could have told me about this at dinner last night or on the phone. You didn’t have to drag me out here. I’d have believed you. I’ve seen pictures. Not that I mind coming out here,” I hurried to add, for fear he’d read what I’d said the wrong way and think I was only interested in work.

“Well, I didn’t want to discuss my suspicions in public. And I figured it would help you to see exactly what it looks like out here.” He shoved his hands into his sweatshirt pockets and turned to watch the river flowing around the fallen pylon. “I was also thinking you might want to see if there were maybe any witnesses.”

I was pretty sure I knew what he was getting at, and he didn’t mean someone else on the road who saw the bridge collapse. “I don’t know that ghosts will be very helpful. The person who died probably had no idea what happened to her, and most ghosts are stuck in the past. They might not be aware of what’s going on in the present. If there are even any ghosts out here.”

“The old bridge was a lovers’ leap, the place people went to throw themselves into the river when they wanted to end it all. Of course, it’s usually not all that deep, so they were killed by hitting the bottom, not by the water. Maybe some of them are haunting the place and could tell us what they saw.”

“It’s a long shot that they’ll have anything useful to say,” I warned him.

“I thought you got a lot of good tips that way.”

“That’s usually because it’s something they really care about. I’ve found that few people actually have any idea how they died, and they don’t care much about things that don’t affect them. Someone who jumped off the old bridge because their lover spurned them won’t have noticed what happened to the new bridge.” He looked so disappointed that I couldn’t bear to let him down when he’d shown so much faith in me and in my ability, so I said, “Still, it won’t hurt to try. We’ll need to go closer to the old bridge, though.”

We hiked along the riverbank, following a rough trail. “This isn’t an official hiking trail, is it?” I asked as we walked.

“No. The old bridge is a popular hangout spot for kids, so they park just off the new road and walk over there. I think the old road right-of-way may still be considered public land, as is land a certain distance from the river, so it’s not technically trespassing. The county constables bust up a drinking party out here every other week or so.”

The old road had been torn up, but the scar it left across the land was still visible. Metal posts spaced so that a car couldn’t get between them had been placed at the end of the old bridge, along with a chain-link fence, the lower corner of which had been pulled back. I hoped he didn’t expect me to go out on that bridge. It might have withstood a flood that had wiped out the newer bridge, but I didn’t like the looks of it. Fortunately, he stopped just in front of the fence, without moving to crawl through the gap. He looked at me expectantly.

“Normally I see more ghosts at night or right around sunset,” I warned him.

“If you want, we can come back then. But see what you can get

now.”

I was still figuring out how this seeing ghosts thing worked. I'd been able to see ghosts all my life, though I hadn't realized until recently what had been going on. I'd thought I had a vivid imagination. Then I'd learned to shut them out. Jean forcing me to see and hear her had opened the floodgates again. I'd found a way to keep my guard up enough that I wasn't always aware of being surrounded by dead people unless their presence was really strong. Apparently, that was what kept Wes from being able to easily read my thoughts. And that meant that if I lowered my guard to see if this place was being haunted, he might be able to read me. I'd have to be careful what I thought, but trying not to think of something meant thinking about something. It was like trying not to think about a pink elephant.

But in order to have a relationship with Wes, I'd have to deal with it. It was worse for him because he couldn't shut out other people's thoughts. I was sure that was one reason he liked me. He got a moment of quiet when he was around me, though he'd also confessed that sometimes it was unsettling not knowing what I was thinking. Not that this was usually a problem with me, since I generally didn't hold back from telling people what I thought—except when it came to my personal feelings.

I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths, imagining lowering my guard. I opened my eyes and looked around, scanning for shadowy figures. I didn't see anything that looked ghostly to me. “Sorry,” I said, shaking my head. “Either there's no one out here at this time of day, or they don't want to tell me anything.”

“Thanks for trying,” he said. “I'm sure it can be unsettling to be open to ghosts all the time.”

“I mostly just see them just drifting around in places like cemeteries.

Otherwise, it's only the ones who are anchored to the land of the living in some way. I would imagine that someone who jumped off a bridge would be trying to escape this world, so they wouldn't linger. On Monday, I'll try talking to the county engineer. You know, your gift might come in handy there. I'm sure if he knew anything, he'd be thinking about it with a reporter present."

"The trick would be finding an excuse for the two of us to be alone with him, so I'd know for certain who I was hearing. And you'd have to find a way to explain how you got information no one could possibly know."

"If we know he's guilty, it becomes easier to push his buttons, maybe prod him into taking some kind of cover-up action we can catch him at. Isn't that how you usually use your gift?"

He glanced around and sighed. "Sorry I dragged you out here. I guess I could have told you on the phone."

That made it sound like getting me to investigate really had been his primary motive. It hadn't been an excuse to spend time with me. Fighting to hide my disappointment, I smiled and said, "Hey, it's a nice day to be outdoors in nature, and you bought me lunch, so it wasn't a bad way to spend a Saturday."

Not quite looking directly at me, he said, "Well, if you're not busy for the next hour or so, there's a café in a town not far from here that's famous for its pies. Want to get dessert?"

"You're speaking my language. Let's go." And if it was in another town, that meant we could hang out together without people in Stirling Mills thinking we were dating.

Chapter Three

Monday morning, I looked in my predecessor's contact files, and for the county engineering department the name with a star by it as "most helpful" was Jesse Martinez, the deputy engineer. Hoping he might be more open than his boss would be, I called the number listed there and was surprised when he answered his phone himself. "Hi, it's Jesse. How can I help you?" he said.

"This is Lexie Lincoln with the *Stirling Mills Gazette*. I wanted to follow up with you about that bridge that was washed out a week ago."

It took him a moment to respond, and I felt like his mood shifted, but when he spoke again, he sounded just as friendly and hearty as he had when he answered the phone. "Yeah, I can imagine that's an issue for you on your end of the county. I bet you have a lot of questions and concerns about what we're doing about that. But it's a busy day here, as you can imagine. Do you think you could meet with me after work? I live in Stirling Mills, so it'll save you a drive if you want to come over to my house."

"Sure, that would be great," I said. I wondered if he really was that busy or if he wanted to talk to me away from the office. My "this is a story!" sense tingled.

"Hey, do you like burgers? I had a cookout yesterday for the game and have plenty of meat left over. I can throw some burgers on the grill. Bring a friend, if you like. We can make it a party."

His tone had definitely changed. I got the sense that he was trying to make this sound like a personal call for the benefit of someone nearby, which was the opposite of what people usually did at work. I was even more certain there was something going on here. "Sure!" I said. "It'll be fun."

"You'll love it. I'm king of the grill." He gave me the address and said to come by around seven.

As soon as I got off the phone, I called Wes. "You know what we said about getting you alone with the county engineer?"

"Yeah?" he said.

"Are you doing anything tonight? Because the deputy engineer invited me over to his place for burgers and told me to bring a friend. I got the distinct impression that he didn't want to discuss the bridge at the office, and he was trying to sound like it was a personal call. You may be right about something shady going on. I think we've got a whistleblower here."

"He might be less open to talking in front of a cop."

"So don't come in uniform."

"If he lives in Stirling Mills, he probably knows who I am."

"And he can send you away if he didn't really want me to bring a friend."

We arranged for me to pick him up, since he didn't live too far from Jesse. I put down the phone and looked up to find a ghost glaring at me from across the desk. "You're going out with the cop again?"

"It's a story," I told Jean, glad my assistant wasn't in the office at the moment. "That's what it was on Saturday. He showed me a failed bridge and told me to investigate it. And now tonight we're going to talk to a county engineer, who seems eager to talk to me, but not at the

office.”

“Well, a story’s fine,” she said. I didn’t tell her about the pie. Not that there was anything to tell. We’d driven to another town, had pie, and driven back. Other than him paying for the pie, there was nothing that had made it look too much like a date. It had been just like any evening at Margarita’s, but with pie instead of enchiladas. I’d enjoyed it a lot, though. If it had been a date, it would have been the best kind of first date, where you feel totally at ease with each other, but there’s just enough of an undercurrent of something else to give you a bit of a charge and a sense that this could go somewhere.

I pulled up in front of his house at the appointed time to find him waiting for me in front. Jesse lived in a neighborhood made mostly of mid-century ranch houses. I smelled charcoal smoke as soon as I got out of the car at his house, and my mouth was already watering as we walked to the front door. I hoped that there were actually going to be burgers and that hadn’t just been something he’d said on the phone for the benefit of whoever was listening in.

Wes rang the doorbell, and chimes pealed inside the house. Nobody came to the door. We waited a few minutes before Wes rang again. “He’s probably in back with the grill,” he said. “He might not have heard the bell.”

“Then I guess we should go around back,” I said. “We were invited.”

The gate in the fence beside the house was unlocked, and we entered to find a path of stepping stones outlined by lights on stakes. String lights hung from the eaves. “Looks like we’re expected,” Wes said.

The smell of burning charcoal grew stronger as we made our way through the narrow side yard. We emerged in a large backyard right out of a layout in a home and garden magazine. Strings of large bulbs

draping from the house to trees and the fence created a glowing canopy over the whole yard. There was a fire pit surrounded by chairs in the middle of the yard, a large uncovered patio with a giant grill and a table with an umbrella, and behind that a covered porch with a stone fireplace at one end and a large TV mounted on the wall of the house on the other. Sofas and chairs were arranged around the TV, and there was a long dining table near the fireplace with bags of chips piled on it. Soda and beer cans snuggled among ice cubes in a galvanized tub near the table. The porch and patio were surrounded by planters full of greenery. We'd yet to have our first freeze of the season, so the summer flowers were still blooming.

"Wow, this is nice," I said.

"Yeah. My yard seems pretty inadequate," Wes said.

"But where's Jesse?"

"Maybe he went to answer the door while we were coming around the side."

"Maybe." I raised my voice and called out, "Jesse? It's Lexie Lincoln." He didn't emerge from a shadow.

"I'm sure he'll come out in a moment," Wes said, easing himself into one of the chairs in front of the TV. "These are nice," he said. "It's like having an outdoor living room."

"He said something about having burgers left over from a football party this weekend, so I guess he has people over for barbecue and watching the game."

"Grilling," he corrected. "If it's burgers, it's just grilling. Barbecue requires a smoker." He glanced around and added, "Which he seems to have, so maybe there is barbecue sometimes."

I resisted the urge to say "whatever," since I knew barbecue was practically a religion in Texas. Disrespecting it was a good way to get

myself run out of town.

When a few more minutes went by and there was still no sign of Jesse, I went to the sliding glass doors at the back of the house and peered inside. I didn't see any lights on in there. If he'd gone to the kitchen to get the meat, there should have been a light visible from somewhere within the house. Houses from that era didn't have the open floor plan that was popular now, so the kitchen might not be visible from the den, but some light should have been showing. "I don't think he's in there."

Wes got up and went over to the grill. "His coals are ready," he said, holding his hand over the grate.

"Surely he didn't start a fire and then run to the store," I said.

"Maybe you should try calling him."

"I had his office number. I'll have to look up his home number." I got out my phone and put his name and street address into a directory search, then called the number that came up. I jumped when a phone rang nearby and turned to see a cordless handset lying on the dining table. It rang five times, a mechanical voice announcing my name, before it went silent.

"Okay, this is weird," Wes said with a frown. "He's clearly expecting someone, and he has the grill going, but there's no sign of him. Try his office number."

"Surely he's not still at the office."

"Just try."

I found that number in my call log and tried. It rang several times and went to voice mail. I hung up without leaving a message. If I was right that he'd been covering up the fact that he was talking to a reporter, him having a message from me wouldn't be good. "Nothing," I reported. "Should we go inside and check?"

“That would be an unauthorized entry.”

“For you. I could try.”

“And I’d have to arrest you for trespassing.”

“Seriously?” I couldn’t tell from his expression whether or not he was joking, and his eyes were in shadow, so I didn’t catch a telltale twinkle. “Anyway, wouldn’t this be an exigent circumstance, a welfare check? I mean, there’s a grill going but no one around. Isn’t that the sort of thing cops look into?”

“Let’s give it a few minutes before we start kicking in doors. He may be in the bathroom, and then that would be embarrassing.”

“We don’t even know if we’d have to kick in doors. The sliding door may be unlocked.”

I took a step toward it and he moved to block me. “Don’t even think about it. It’s still trespassing if the door is unlocked.”

“Aren’t we already trespassing by being in the yard?”

“We were invited to a cookout. But actually going in the house is different.”

“I think something may be up. We’ve got a whistleblower who was expecting us but who is now missing.”

“Give it five more minutes.”

The smell of charcoal, even without meat on it, was making me hungry, and I felt bad for thinking about burgers when someone might be in danger. Me missing a meal might not be the worst thing to come out of this evening.

The phone rang, and both of us jumped. The mechanical voice announced that the call was from Steve Martinez. The phone rang five times, then went silent. “Steve Martinez?” Wes mused aloud. “He’s the kicker on the football team. Good college prospects, apparently. He

must be Jesse's son."

"And Jesse didn't answer the phone for him, either," I said. I went over to look at the handset, which said there had now been three missed calls. One was mine, one was Steve's, and there had been one already when I first looked at it. "Has it been five minutes?"

"Yeah, I think so. Let's do this officially." He got out his phone, dialed, then said, "Hey, it's Wes. I need a welfare check. We've got a grill going in the backyard and were invited at this time, but there doesn't seem to be anyone here." He gave the address and ended the call, then reported, "We'll have a patrol car right over."

"You can't do it?"

"I'm off duty and am here as a guest."

"It's good to know that you take busting into people's houses seriously."

"That's actually in the Constitution and was one of our gripes with British rule. Besides, I don't want the department to have to pay for repairs when we kick a door in for what turns out to be no good reason."

The phone rang, and this time the voice announced that it was the Stirling Mills Police Department calling. "They really are covering all the bases, aren't they?" I said.

"There's paperwork, and there are boxes to check." He got out of the chair and headed toward the side yard. "I'd better go meet them out front."

I joined him, pointing out, "I was the one who was invited," when he gave me a look.

A patrol car pulled up in front just as we emerged through the gate. "Hey, Wes, what's up?" the officer said when he got out of the car. "Is

something going on with Jesse?”

“You know him?” I asked.

“Just about everyone knows Jesse. He has the best football parties. You’re lucky to get invited. I got on the guest list when I got called out for a noise complaint and didn’t find anything that violated any ordinances. They fed me and invited me to come back the next week, so I ended up being a regular. Was tonight a Monday Night Football party? I hadn’t heard about it.”

I opened my mouth to say that it had actually been a meeting when a dog nearby started barking so loudly that it would have drowned out anything I said. The three of us whirled to look for the vicious beast that was about to attack, only to see a dachshund rushing toward us on stubby little legs, barking furiously in a sound that was too big for that tiny body. Behind the dog came an older woman wearing a bulky, sagging sweater and a scowl. She called out in a harsh voice, “What’s going on here?”

“Nothing to worry about, ma’am,” the officer said. “I’m just here to check on something. Have you seen Mr. Martinez this evening?”

“I don’t often see him, but I haven’t heard anything this evening, which is rare. The man’s a nuisance and he’s bringing down the neighborhood.”

From what I could tell, Jesse’s house and lawn were better kept than the rest of the street. This woman’s yard was weedy and neglected. But I suspected that wasn’t what she meant.

Her rant continued. “He has all those people out there all the time. I can’t go in my backyard during football season. I don’t even need to watch a game to know how it’s going because I can hear them yelling over there. And when I go over to complain, he just invites me to join them.”

The police couldn't say anything, but I didn't like letting jerks go unquestioned. "I take it you don't," I remarked, a challenge in my tone.

"Why would I want to socialize with that kind of people? Now he brings me a plate of food whenever he has guests." From her tone, you'd have thought he was dumping his garbage on her lawn, and I barely resisted the urge to say, "The nerve!"

"What kind of people?" Wes asked mildly.

"Well, you know . . ."

"I'm usually there," the other officer said.

She swallowed so hard that I could hear the gulp. "People who like sports," she hurried to say. "I don't care about football."

"Have you seen Mr. Martinez?" the officer asked again. I figured it was a good bet that she was the sort of neighbor who kept an eye on comings and goings.

"He came home from work a bit early for a Monday." The sniff she punctuated her sentence with told us what she thought of that behavior. "Then I could smell the grill going, and I began to dread what tonight would be like, but I haven't heard anything since then. I'm sure it will all begin soon, and I'll be trapped in my house, listening to that noise." This whole time, her dog barked nonstop. My ears hurt. I figured if anyone had a noise complaint, it was Jesse. She narrowed her eyes. "He hasn't done anything, has he?"

"This is merely a welfare check, ma'am. Thank you for your time," the officer said. She didn't take the hint and leave, but she didn't follow as the three of us headed to the backyard.

"Let me guess," I said softly, "she was the one who called in the noise complaint."

"Like clockwork every weekend," the officer said. "And it really isn't

that loud. They keep the volume on the TV low because nobody wants to listen to the announcers. There may be some cheering, but we even brought out equipment to check sound levels, and it's way below anything in any city ordinance. Her dog registers louder than the parties, even when we're measuring from Jesse's yard."

"Oh, this is *that* house," Wes said. "I've seen the paperwork. I think we were spending more manpower on her noise complaints than on actual crime investigations. That's why they brought out the equipment, and now we ignore her calls unless other neighbors also complain. She calls the cops if her neighbors close a door too loudly."

"Yeah, I handled one of those calls," the officer said. We'd reached the backyard again. The officer turned on his flashlight and shone it around the yard, as though verifying that Jesse was, in fact, not there. He wandered around the patio area, noting the party supplies and pausing by the grill. "Coals are hot," he said with a nod. "He can't have been gone too long, but it's not like him to leave a grill unattended. Can you catch me up on what's going on here?"

"I called him at work to interview him for a story," I said. "I got the impression he didn't want to talk at work, like maybe there was someone in earshot he didn't want to hear our conversation. He invited me over for burgers after work, as though he was inviting me to a party. He even asked me to bring a guest. That's why Wes is here. I figured that if he didn't feel safe talking at the office it might not be bad to have a cop handy." My face felt warm, and it was a little unsettling just how much I didn't want him to assume this was a date. Then I wondered how Wes might have taken my statement. Did *he* think it was a date? This relationship hadn't even really begun and it was already confusing. "We got here at the time he said, and it was like this. It looks like he'd started setting up, but there's no sign of him. He hasn't answered his phone, and I wasn't the only one who called him. I

can't see any lights on inside."

He got out his phone and swiped around on the screen before holding it up to his ear. A minute later, he lowered the phone, shaking his head. "He's not answering his cell, either."

"His son called earlier," Wes said.

"That's an idea. I'll call Steve." He swiped around some more before raising the phone to his ear. "Hey, Steve, it's Hector," he said. It seemed he'd really been adopted into the football party bunch if he had the son in his contacts. "Have you heard from your dad? He's not home even though he invited some people over and the grill's going, and he hasn't been answering the phone." After listening a moment, he said, "You've got a key, right? Would you mind coming over? I think we'd better check inside, and I'd rather not kick the door in. Thanks. See you in a bit." He ended the call and reported, "His son'll be here soon. He and the ex only live a couple of blocks away."

"We haven't actually tried opening the doors," I said.

"Good. But I'll give it a shot now." He went over to the patio door and tugged on it, but it didn't slide. "Locked," he said. "We'll just wait for Steve."

A couple of minutes later, I heard the sound of a car engine that soon stopped, and then a car door shut. A gate on the other side of the yard opened and a compactly built teen boy entered the yard. "Hey, Hector," he said. "Any news?"

"The house is locked."

"This isn't like Dad." The boy's voice was tight with tension. "I've got an opener for the garage. If he's out, that'll be the door we can get through into the house."

We followed him through the gate to the driveway, where the kid reached into what looked to me like a vintage Camaro in mint

condition and picked up a remote, which he clicked. The garage door rose, revealing one of the tidiest garages I'd ever seen. One car was parked in there, leaving a space free for another car. Plastic tubs were neatly lined up on shelves, and tools were arranged on a pegboard over a workbench at the rear. "His car's here," Steve said. He headed for the door into the house, inserted a key in the lock, and turned the knob. The door didn't budge. "I think the deadbolt is on," he said. "It's locked from inside."

"Let's try the front door," Hector suggested.

We trooped around the side of the house and found that this door, too, was locked from inside. "There isn't a key for the patio door," Steve said. "You can't unlock it from outside."

"You want me to try to kick a door in?" Hector asked.

The boy nodded grimly, adding a soft, "Yeah. Yeah, I think so."

"Then let's do the garage door. It'll do less damage and we can still secure the house afterward."

It took Hector a couple of good kicks before the frame broke and the door opened. "I'd better check inside first," he said. "Wes, wanna come with, in case I need backup?"

"You two stay out here," Wes instructed before heading inside with Hector. They weren't in there long before they came back out. Hector was already on his radio, and Wes went straight to Steve, guiding him away from the house. "Steve, is your mom home?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Can you call her and get her to come over here?"

"Why? What's wrong?" the boy asked, his eyes wide with alarm. I had a sick feeling in my gut, and I was sure Steve felt even worse. I couldn't think of a good, happy reason why Wes would think the kid

might need his mom. Apparently, Steve's mind went in the same direction. "My dad's dead, isn't he?" he asked.

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Chapter Four

“I’d rather wait until your mom gets here to talk about it,” Wes said gently to Steve.

“I’m eighteen, so I’m not a minor, in case that’s what you’re worried about,” Steve said, his tone defiant, though light glistened in the tracks of the tears spilling from his eyes.

“Just call your mom, and then we’ll talk.”

The kid got out his phone, instructed it to “call Mom,” then after a moment said, “Yeah, I’m at Dad’s and the police are here. They asked me to call you. I think something bad happened to Dad, but they won’t talk about it until you get here.” There was a pause, then he said, “Thanks. See you in a bit.” He ended the call and told Wes, “She’ll be here in a few minutes.”

My heart went out to both of them. I couldn’t imagine what Steve was going through, and the uncertainty probably only made it worse. It wasn’t much easier for Wes, having to break that kind of news to a kid while still being professional and following procedure. I wanted to hug the poor boy who looked so bereft standing there, trying to be an adult while he was really just a kid who’d realized he’d probably lost his father. I didn’t know how he’d take a hug from a stranger, but I tried to think of what else I could do.

“Let’s go sit down,” I said, gesturing toward the backyard.

“Good idea,” Wes said with a slight nod toward me. “Go have a

seat.”

I guided Steve to the porch and got him settled in a chair facing away from the glass doors. Once he was seated, I went over to one of the tubs full of drinks and got a can of soda, which I brought to him. “Here, have something to drink,” I said. “If you don’t like this one, I can get you something else.”

“This is fine,” he said, his voice flat and distant. He popped the top and chugged half the can.

I wasn’t sure what to say to him. Wes hadn’t confirmed anything, so condolences probably weren’t appropriate, and I wasn’t sure he’d want to hear them from someone he didn’t know who hadn’t known his father. I hesitated to ask him any questions, lest I look like I was interviewing him. I was a journalist, but I wasn’t ghoulish enough to intrude on such a fraught moment with a kid. I settled for saying, “Do you want some chips?”

He shook his head. “No. No thanks. The drink is enough.”

I heard a car pull up in the driveway and a car door slam. “What’s going on?” a shrill female voice called out. I heard Wes reply, but he spoke so softly that I only got the general sense of his voice without being able to pick out any words. The female voice that responded was equally soft. A moment later, Wes and a woman entered the yard and headed toward us.

She had short blondish hair in a style that’s often described as “wash and go” and wore slacks, a cardigan sweater, and flat loafers. I got the impression of a very low-maintenance woman who preferred as little fuss as possible. After her initial outburst, she seemed to have settled down and was making a visible effort to be calm. Every muscle in her face was taut, as though she was fighting desperately to keep it from crumpling. “Steve, honey,” she said in a voice rough with emotion

as she went over to him. He launched himself from the chair and into her arms, though he had to bend to bury his face against her shoulder.

“Dad’s dead, isn’t he?” he said, a note of hope in his voice, wanting her to tell him he was wrong.

She glanced to Wes, who stepped forward and said, “I’m sorry, but yes, he was dead when we went into the house.”

Steve took a big, gulping breath and stepped away from his mother. “Was it a heart attack, or a stroke, or something like that? I know he ate way too much red meat.” His mother glanced toward the ground, turning away from her son. Wes must have told her something before they came to the yard.

“I don’t think so,” Wes said. “There’s still an investigation to conduct, but it appears that he bled to death.”

“An accident?” Steve asked. “He liked to play ninja chef when he was chopping things up.”

“I don’t think so,” Wes said. “The cut doesn’t look like it was an accident.”

“What?” Steve blurted. “But the house was locked from inside. We couldn’t even get in with a key. So he would have had to . . .” He shook his head. “But no, he wouldn’t. He had the grill going. Trust me, if you know my dad, he wouldn’t start the coals, get them just right, and then kill himself. He’d have at least grilled the burgers first.”

“As I said, there’s still an investigation to conduct. The crime scene team will be here soon. In the meantime, I’d like to ask you a few questions.” He gestured toward the patio chairs. Steve and his mother took seats on the sofa, the boy snuggled against her. Wes sat across from them, and I took the chair farthest from them, hoping Wes would forget I was there and not tell me to leave. I couldn’t ethically use anything they said in an article about Jesse’s death, since I hadn’t told

them who I was and they just thought they were talking to the police, but if they had any insights into what Jesse thought about the bridge, that might help me.

“Now, Ms. . . .” Wes began.

“Mrs. Martinez. Alicia,” she said. “I never went back to my maiden name. We were legally divorced and lived separately, but we were still together. We just couldn’t live in the same house with each other.” She gave a bitter bark of a laugh. “It turns out that ‘opposites attract’ is fun while you’re dating, not so good when you’re trying to live together. I need a lot of alone time, and he couldn’t stand to be alone. If he was happy, I felt crowded. If I was happy, he felt isolated. So he moved out, but just down the street. The divorce was to make things cleaner for legal and financial reasons, but we still had a relationship. We still spent time together. We raised our son together.” Her composure finally cracked, and she said with a sob as the tears began to flow, “I still loved him so much. What happened to him? He never would have killed himself, I’m sure of it.”

Steve put an arm around his mother’s shoulders. “She’s right. He wouldn’t. He was looking forward to seeing me in the playoffs after we won Friday’s game. He was excited about the scholarship offers I’ve been getting, and he was already making plans for the ultimate tailgate party for my first college game. He was even talking about getting an RV so he could drive around to all my games. Plus, he’s really religious, and suicide is definitely against his religion.”

“Was there anything that might have been bothering him?” Wes asked. I paid keen attention because this might relate to my investigation.

“He and his new boss didn’t get along so well,” Steve said. “He thought he was going to get promoted into that job, but then they hired

someone else who was younger and less experienced, and there was some tension, I think. Dad seemed to be okay with it. He wasn't really ambitious. He worked for the paycheck so he'd have money to do stuff he liked. But his boss seemed to see him as a threat and was a bit paranoid. At least, that's what Dad said. I never met him. He didn't come over for any of the cookouts, though I'm pretty sure Dad invited him. Dad invited everyone. If you stood in line with him in the grocery store, you'd end up invited to come over and watch the game."

"Which was why I couldn't live with him," Alicia said with a wry smile. "The man never met a stranger, and his door was always open, while I like to have my house to myself most of the time." She frowned. "Is anything missing from the house? Could it have been a robbery? He was so trusting. He might have brought someone home or invited someone over, and they took advantage of him."

"Mom, the house was locked from the inside," Steve said. "They even had to kick the door in because my key wouldn't open any of the doors. The interior deadbolts were all on and the patio door was locked."

"Have they searched the whole house? The killer might still be in there," Alicia said, clutching her son's hand in alarm.

"Officer Gutierrez is still inside, and a crime scene team is on the way," Wes said. "They'll find anyone who's in there, but we may need some help in telling if anything's missing. As far as I could tell, the big items that tend to get stolen, like the TV and computer, were still there."

I was still pondering what Steve had said about his father's boss. Was he the reason Jesse had tried to sound like he was making social plans when he was on the phone with me? The boss would have known Jesse was meeting with someone. I wasn't sure how the locked house

issue fit, but otherwise the boss struck me as the prime suspect. If he was already paranoid about having an underling who was more experienced and qualified, then if he was involved at all in something related to the bridge collapse, he might have been afraid Jesse would spill the beans.

“We need to cook the burgers,” Steve said abruptly. “The coals are ready. The hamburgers are probably in the fridge. They shouldn’t go to waste.” His fingers twitched, and he shifted with nervous energy. I recognized his need to do *something*, to take some kind of action.

“It’s not as though hamburgers were the murder weapon and we’d be eating the evidence,” I said to Wes.

“Hey, we read that story in English class,” Steve said.

“I think everyone reads that story in English class,” Wes said, standing. “Stay put. I’ll talk to Hector.” He went through the gate to the garage and came back a few minutes later, carrying several trays of food on top of each other. He brought them over to the table and unstacked a tray of pre-formed hamburgers covered in plastic wrap; a tray of sliced tomatoes, onions, lettuce, and cheese, also covered in plastic wrap; and a tray of hamburger buns—some looking like pretzels and others like brioche. Jesse had definitely taken his burgers seriously, and all this preparation struck me as even more proof that suicide was unlikely.

Steve took the burgers to the grill and went to work. At the sound of car doors shutting, Wes went back out to the driveway, presumably to meet with the crime scene team. He served as the main detective for the small police department, so I figured he was now considering himself to be on duty.

I wandered over to join him, reaching the driveway just as he wrapped up giving the crime scene team instructions. They headed

inside through the garage with their gear, and I said, “Do you really think it’s suicide?”

“Well, all the locked doors make it pretty likely. Who else could have done it?”

“You’re sure there’s no one else inside?”

“The team will clear the house, but if someone’s hiding, they’re doing a good job of it.”

“It just doesn’t make sense. Why go to all the effort to get ready for a cookout, only to kill himself? He must have come home from work, made burgers, and cut up all the veggies, and then sliced his wrists.”

“The burgers and fixings may have been left over from yesterday’s party. Didn’t he tell you he needed to use up the party food?”

“Okay, yeah, I’ll give you that. But he put coals in the grill and lit them and set out the stuff like drinks and chips. Then he went inside, locking the patio door, went into the bathroom, and killed himself. If he was going to kill himself, why bother with the grill, and why lock the door?”

“Wait, how did you know he was in the bathroom? I thought I was the mind reader here.”

I couldn’t resist a grin. “So, he was in the bathroom! I figured.”

“But how?”

“There are two reasons he’d have gone inside after starting the grill: to get the burgers or to use the bathroom before the guests arrived. Probably both, hitting the bathroom before bringing out the food. The fact that you were willing to go into the kitchen to get the food suggests that the kitchen isn’t the immediate crime scene. If the body was lying in the kitchen, with whatever evidence went with it, you wouldn’t have gone into the kitchen for any reason. So, the other place

he would have gone was the bathroom.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Very good.”

“And if he bled out and was in the bathroom, and you think it could be suicide, let me guess, he was in a bathtub full of water?”

“Right again. You’re pretty good at this.”

“I used to work the courthouse beat. I’ve seen a lot. But why lock the doors?”

“He might have been trying to spare his family from being the ones to find him. If they couldn’t open the house, even with a key, they’d call the police, and the police would then be the ones to find him. I’ve seen it before. It’s pretty common for suicides, unless they’re lashing out at someone they want to find them.”

“I assume the bathroom door was locked from the inside, too.”

He nodded. “But these details aren’t for publication. If there is a killer—and I’m not saying there is—we don’t want them to know what we know.”

“Remember, I don’t go to press until Thursday night, so I’m not going to be printing details of the investigation in progress. With any luck, I’ll just report on the outcome of the investigation.”

“You’re being optimistic. We seldom wrap up a murder investigation in three business days.”

“I have faith in you. And there’s always the next issue. So you’re saying it is a murder investigation?”

“Everything is currently on the table, but there are all those locked doors. How did that happen if it’s not a suicide?”

“That’s for you to figure out.”

“Exactly. That’s for me to figure out.”

And it seemed we were back to our usual dynamic. “Hey, you’re the

one who brought me in on this. We're here because you asked me to look into that bridge."

"The bridge. Not this case. This is firmly within my jurisdiction. We'll handle it. And by 'we' I mean the police department. You are not included in that 'we.'"

"Investigating that bridge will naturally bring me in on this, since my source was found dead before I could talk to him. That's another point against suicide. If he was guilt-stricken about his role in the bridge and agreed to talk to a reporter so he could set the record straight and atone, wouldn't he have waited until after he'd talked to me to kill himself? Blow the whistle, then take the escape route. But inviting me over, setting up to serve me dinner, then killing himself before I got here just doesn't make sense. I think there's a good chance that whoever was behind whatever was shady about that bridge got him out of the way before he could talk."

"We'll pursue all the angles, and that might even put the bridge within my jurisdiction," Wes said. "We may be here awhile. I can get a ride with one of these units if you'd like to go home. You don't have to wait here for me."

I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow. "You have met me, right?"

With a sigh, he said, "Stay out of the way. And no interviews. I'll give you an official statement later, but I'm not ready to release anything yet. As you said, your deadline isn't until Thursday, so there's no rush."

"Do you really think I'd interview a grieving wife and son minutes after they learned that their husband or father was killed?"

"No, I don't," he said, sounding sincere. "But I just wanted to make that clear."

As I headed back to the porch, I found myself pondering once again

whether we could ever make this work. Maybe this was a line we shouldn't cross. We hadn't gone anywhere truly romantic, not even a kiss, so it would be easy to back off now and stay as sort-of friends. I didn't want to be with someone who didn't entirely trust me to do the right thing.

Steve stood at the grill, watching the burgers with a practiced eye. He wore an apron with the word "Apprentice" on it in the *Star Wars* font. "They'll be ready in a bit," he told me. "You want cheese?"

"Yes, please," I said. I probably shouldn't have been hungry in these circumstances, but I was starving, and the smell of the grilling burgers wasn't helping.

He flipped the burgers expertly before heading to the table to pick up the tray with the cheese slices. "Your dad must have taught you his grilling secrets," I commented as he placed a slice of cheese on top of each burger.

"Yeah, he taught me lots of stuff," he said. "Grilling, barbecue, cars. For Christmas before I turned sixteen, he gave me a car—this old junker that looked like it was right off the salvage lot. It didn't even have wheels on it. Then we rebuilt it together. That was the best gift ever because it wasn't just a car. It was an education, and it was time we spent together."

My eyes stung with tears for his loss. Jesse sounded like he'd been a great dad, and now this kid wouldn't have his father in his life. His dad wouldn't get to see him in playoff games or playing college football. He wouldn't get the chance to be a grandfather who taught his grandkids about grilling and cars. "I'm so sorry for what you've lost," I said, sniffing back a tear.

"Yeah, well, at least I had him while I did, and that's more than a lot of my friends have." He sounded composed, but his hand shook

enough that he fumbled and dropped his spatula. Just before it landed on the grill, it moved back up into his hand.

I blinked, not sure what I'd just seen. If it was what I thought it was, I had an idea of how Jesse could have been murdered while the house was locked from the inside.

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Chapter Five

I'd been living in Stirling Mills long enough that I wasn't entirely shocked to see someone apparently moving something with his mind. The town was full of people with uncanny gifts, thanks to a troupe of carnival sideshow performers who got stranded here during the Depression. Their abilities to read minds, hypnotize people, channel electricity, and perform feats of great strength weren't just acts. They were real gifts, and after a few generations, it seemed half the town had some supernatural gift.

But I couldn't believe that Steve had killed his father. Unless he was a brilliant actor and needed whatever he might inherit from his father more than he needed a father to work on cars with him and come to his football games, I didn't think he was our killer. Gifts ran in families, so did Steve get it from his father or from his mother? It was too late to find out if Jesse had been telekinetic, but Alicia was right here, and the ex was usually high on the list of suspects, no matter how amicable their divorce had been. Could she have killed her ex-husband, then used her power to lock all the interior deadbolts before she left?

It all depended on whether she had the power. I needed to test her. Steve had used the power as a reflex, seemingly without thinking. I glanced around the patio, looking for something I could knock over that would spur her to react. In case she didn't actually have the power or didn't use it, I didn't dare test her with something truly valuable. I didn't want to have to pay to replace either my phone or someone

else's. Steve had left his drink on a side table near where his mother sat. That would do. If she had the power, she'd probably act instinctively to stop the drink from landing on her. If she didn't, her clothes looked like they'd wash. I wouldn't be stuck with a dry cleaning bill.

I shifted my purse to my right shoulder and let it hang loose as I passed by, heading to resume my seat. I let the purse swing so that it hit the soda can, then whirled, as though realizing I must have hit something. "Oh no!" I cried out, lunging to catch the can that was already tipping toward Alicia. I didn't stand a chance of getting to it in time, but she whipped out her hand and caught it just before it spilled. I wanted to scream in frustration that she'd thwarted my test, but I forced a smile and said, "Wow, quick reflexes."

"I'm an elementary school teacher," Alicia said with a smile. "I've developed a sixth sense for impending disaster. In fact, you can tell how distracted I am that I didn't automatically move that can away from the edge of the table."

"I guess I need to be more careful," I said. "Sorry about that."

"No harm done."

A sixth sense for impending disaster might or might not be an actual uncanny ability—in this town, it wouldn't surprise me—but it wasn't what I was testing her for. Whether or not her ability to sense disaster was supernatural, it would make forcing her to use telekinesis—if she had that ability—more challenging. If she was hiding her ability, she'd be able to use normal methods to fend off disaster without resorting to superpowers. I didn't think I could get away with another clumsy accident, so I had to think of some other way to test her.

I was still trying to come up with another test when Steve came over with a platter of burgers and buns that he'd toasted on the grill.

“Burgers are ready. Help yourself.”

Alicia eyed them, looking queasy. “I’m not really hungry,” she said.

“Mom, you need to eat.”

“I had dinner already. I eat a lot earlier than Jesse. But don’t mind me. Please, go ahead.”

I couldn’t decide if that was suspicious. As a teacher, she was probably home earlier than most and might have eaten dinner before seven. Or had she lost her appetite from grief—or guilt?

Steve didn’t seem to have any problems with his appetite. He placed a burger on a bun and loaded it with lettuce, tomatoes, ketchup, and mustard, then took a huge bite. Since he was a teen boy, I decided this didn’t indicate a lack of grief. He was probably starving even if he’d eaten earlier with his mother.

I put together a burger for myself and took a big bite. Jesse and his son certainly had some grilling talent. It may have been the best burger I’d ever had, better even than anything I’d eaten in a restaurant. I told Steve so after I’d eaten a few more bites, and he ducked his head in embarrassment while mumbling a thanks. It was juicy without being greasy, and there was some seasoning in there, but it still tasted like a burger without being overwhelmed by the seasoning.

The only thing that marred the meal was the awareness that there was a murder investigation going on in the house. I could see people moving around inside. Someone came to the patio door, took photos, then dusted for fingerprints around the sliding door’s handle and latch. I saw Wes in the background, talking to someone in the living room. I was dying to tell him what I’d learned, but I’d have to wait until he came back outside.

In the meantime, what could I do to determine if Steve had inherited his gift from his mother? Maybe if she was the one who

dropped something, she'd instinctively catch it the way Steve had done, but she wasn't holding anything, and I figured it would be pretty cruel to startle someone going through what she was.

Steve was back at the grill, cooking another round of burgers. I didn't think I could eat another one, but I poured some chips from a bag onto my plate. I'd just lifted the bag and was preparing to put it back on the table when a voice very close to me said, "Do you think the police might want to eat? I can grill some more burgers."

I was so startled that I jerked my hand holding the chip bag, sending chips flying. Then I realized it was Steve, standing right beside me. I'd thought he was at the grill and I still saw someone there out of the corner of my eye. I turned to see a man standing at the grill. He wore an apron that matched Steve's, aside from saying "Master" on it instead of "Apprentice." The top of the star from the Dallas Cowboys logo on a football jersey peeked out from behind the bib of the apron. This man had the insubstantial quality of a ghost. I noticed the living world counterpart of his apron hanging on a hook next to the sliding doors. It had to be Jesse's ghost. If I could talk to him, I might be able to get a lot of answers, but I couldn't do that in front of Alicia and Steve, who didn't seem to be aware Jesse was out here with us. When I turned back toward Steve, I didn't notice any chips on the ground or table. I suspected they'd been returned to the bag before they fell, but I didn't know who'd done it.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you," Steve said.

"I think all of us are a little jumpy right now," I said, resisting the urge to look back at the grill to see if Jesse was still there. "Anyway, we can always ask the cops if they want something when they're through with their work."

"I need to cook the meat, anyway. It won't keep, and it'll freeze

better cooked.” He put a metal dome over the tray with the burgers and went back to the grill, where his father moved aside to make room for him, then stood as though supervising. I could imagine that this was a familiar scene for the two of them that had played out many an afternoon. It was a pity Steve wasn’t aware it was still happening.

I wasn’t sure exactly how ghosts worked. Even ghosts weren’t entirely sure, themselves. It did seem that it was the people who had either unfinished business or close ties to something in the world who stuck around. Jesse probably had both. He’d died before he could do anything about the bridge, and he didn’t seem to want to leave his son or his grill. I thought that was another mark against suicide. If he’d wanted to leave this life, would he stick around here?

I still hadn’t figured out if Alicia was also telekinetic. Steve had been the one standing by me who’d startled me, but would he have cared so much about making a mess with chips that he’d have automatically stopped them from spilling?

Wes came into the backyard from the driveway. “They’re about to wrap things up in there,” he said. “Then we can seal up the house. I’d prefer that you not go in there just yet, though.”

“You’re not leaving him in there, are you?” Alicia asked.

“The coroner has already taken him away.”

She nodded but said softly, “I’d have liked to have seen him.”

“No, you wouldn’t, ma’am,” Wes said. “You’ll get a chance later. We’ll need someone to come make a definitive identification of the body.”

“I can do that,” Steve said. “I’m not a minor.”

“No, I’ll do it,” Alicia said. “You shouldn’t have to see your father that way.”

“I’ll be okay. I want to do whatever it takes to find out what happened to him. I don’t think he killed himself.”

“We’ll know more after we get some test results,” Wes said. I couldn’t be entirely sure, but I thought Wes sounded fairly uncertain.

“I’ve got lots of burgers if the cops want to eat before they leave,” Steve said. “Dad would want me to feed them.” The ghost standing beside him confirmed this with a nod.

“I’ll go tell them,” Wes said before leaving the yard again.

I didn’t get a chance to talk to Wes once the whole crime scene team was on the patio, and I doubted Alicia would let her gift show around all those people. Even though the talents were widespread in the community, no one talked about them and they almost never used them publicly. I knew there had been some wariness among the locals when the sideshow first came to town, and that had made the sideshow people cautious, a trait that continued into the present. There was even a chance she didn’t know she had a talent. She might have merely thought she had good reflexes. A lot of the descendants of sideshow people were totally unaware of their heritage, after it had been kept secret for so long.

I did take advantage of the opportunity to chat with Hector. If he was a regular at Jesse’s cookouts, he might have some insight. “Were you at yesterday’s party?” I asked him. I thought it was possible that something had happened then that might have led to murder.

He shook his head as he finished chewing a bite of burger, then swallowed and said, “No, not yesterday’s. I had to work.”

“Do you know who some of the regulars were who might have been there? I’d like to interview some of his friends for the obituary.” That was true, even though I had additional reasons for wanting to talk to his friends.

“I can get you a list. I have some of the contacts on my phone. Just a sec.”

Before he could set down his plate, I said, “No rush. I’m not going to call them now. Finish your dinner.” He nodded and resumed eating.

I wandered over to where Steve was manning the grill with his father’s ghost at his side. “I think your dad would be proud of the way you’re continuing his tradition,” I said. The ghost nodded and smiled. “Were you at yesterday’s party?”

“Unfortunately, no. I got together with some friends, instead. We were working on a school project.” His voice broke as he added, “And I’m always going to regret having missed that last chance to spend time with Dad.”

“I think he’d understand,” I said as the ghost patted him on the shoulder. He shivered as though he might have felt it.

I went back to trying to test Alicia. I set drinks down near the edges of tables, tripped a few times, spilled a plate of chips, and bumped into people so they’d nearly spill something right in front of her, but every time she acted, I couldn’t see any invisible forces at work. She always physically intervened. If she was using any telekinetic power, the distance between her hand and the item she was catching or moving had to have been microscopic. I had no conclusive evidence.

When the cops had wrapped up the meal and helped make sure the area was secure, Wes and I left. “Well, that wasn’t the cookout I was expecting,” I said once we were in my car.

“And it wasn’t much help in finding out what happened with that bridge,” he said.

“Unless the fact that he was killed is evidence that something did happen.”

“Do your suspicions have anything to do with why you were

suddenly so clumsy tonight? I've never noticed you tripping so often or spilling things. You're lucky that Alicia has great reflexes."

"I was checking something, but I'm sure you don't want to hear about it."

"If it has to do with this case, I do."

"You never want to hear my theories. And this one wouldn't help you much because it's not the sort of thing you can put in a report."

"Then tell me unofficially."

"Okay, then, but no scoffing."

"I don't scoff!"

"You do. You always dismiss my wacky theories, and how often do I turn out to be right?"

"I promise not to scoff."

"I will hold you to that. I noticed Steve moving a spatula without touching it, and it occurred to me that telekinesis could explain the locked doors. Someone could have killed Jesse, then moved the locks from outside to make it look like Jesse had locked all the doors from the inside."

Instead of scoffing, Wes gasped. "That explains it!"

"You don't sound like you're mocking me. Are you taking this seriously?"

"Not the case," he said, shaking his head. "But Steve is the place kicker on the football team, and he's eerily accurate. Even the kicks that look like they're going to go wide veer back between the uprights. If he's telekinetic, that would explain a lot."

"Wouldn't that be cheating?"

"I suppose it violates the spirit of the rules, but there's no rule against using the power of your mind to move the ball, since most

people don't believe that's even possible. If an opponent tried to accuse him of that, the refs would laugh them out of the stadium. He may not even realize he's doing it, especially if he isn't conscious of his power. Just about all kickers will the ball to go between the uprights. But if he's got that power, if he tells the ball to go just a bit to the right, it may actually go there. Are you saying you think he killed his father and then locked the doors from the outside?"

"No. I don't think he killed his father—though if he cheats at football, I may have to reevaluate my assessment of his character. But seeing what he could do gave me the idea of how the killing might have happened. Those gifts are spread all over the town after all these years, so it's possible that someone he's related to did it. I was trying to see if I could get Alicia to show evidence of the talent so I'd know which side of the family to investigate."

"Did you find anything?"

"Nothing conclusive. She has great reflexes, but I couldn't tell if that's from years teaching little kids or if it's a paranormal talent, and I never could be sure whether she was using telekinesis."

I waited for the scoff, in spite of his promise. For someone who had an uncanny talent of his own, he was weirdly resistant to considering the supernatural in any case, perhaps because that tended to make things more difficult for him. He needed real evidence, and he couldn't include telekinesis on a police report or testify about it in a trial. It occurred to me that this killer might very well go free unless there was significant physical evidence, an eyewitness, and a confession because most judges and juries wouldn't be able to get past the idea of those locked doors. There would have to be a reasonable alternative explanation for how that had happened.

I dropped Wes off at his house and returned to my place. I lived in

an apartment above the newspaper office and press room, which meant my ghostly boss was able to visit me there. It had once been her apartment, and it didn't look too different now than it had in her day. It was still an Art Deco showcase, with the addition of a flat-screen TV mounted on one wall and a few Ikea bookcases I'd brought with me. Jean was waiting for me, seated on (or floating just above) the sofa, and glaring like a disapproving parent whose teenager had come home after curfew.

"And where have you been?" she asked.

"Out."

"With that cop?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. On a case. And we ended up with another case."

I gave her a rundown of what had happened while I made a cup of herbal tea, leaving out the more complicated details for the moment. If I brought up the locked doors and telekinesis theory, I'd never be able to get her out of my hair so I could get some rest. "So now I've got the bridge to figure out, with my primary source gone, and I've got the possible murder," I concluded.

"It seems likely they're linked."

"That's my thinking. Someone wanted him quiet and possibly wanted to deflect guilt to him. I noticed his ghost was already there in the yard, so I may go back and talk to him when the yard isn't full of cops. I didn't notice any security cameras in the backyard. I'll just have to get past the nosy neighbor."

"Nosy neighbor? Could be a potential suspect."

"It sounds like she might have wanted him dead. The police say she pretty much reports the neighbors for disturbing the peace when they sneeze too loud, and she was constantly complaining about all his

parties even though he invited her and brought her food, but I didn't get the impression that she had any idea he was dead when we talked to her. If Wes picked up anything from her, he didn't mention it."

"That kind of old biddy is so full of hate that it would be hard to tell whether she was merely wishing him dead or thinking about having actually done it. So, what are your next steps?"

"I got a list of regulars at his parties from one of the cops who ended up on the guest list after being called so many times by the neighbor. I'm going to talk to them for the obit and see what I can learn. The obit also gives me an excuse to talk to the boss, so I can check in on the bridge investigation. But for tonight, I'm going to try to get some sleep. At least this time I wasn't the one who found the body, so I don't have that in my brain. Good night, Jean." I said it pointedly enough that I hoped she'd get the clue.

"Be at work on time in the morning. You still have a paper to put out," she said before vanishing.

I finished my tea and tried not to think of either case as I got ready for bed. I tried to focus instead on what should be in the next issue of the newspaper, but I figured that aside from Jesse's death, it would be full of coverage of the football team and the playoffs, so most of the writing would be done by the sports freelancers. That would leave me plenty of time free to investigate.

Chapter Six

The next morning, I checked with Wes to find out who had been notified about Jesse's death. I was eager to start talking to people, but I didn't want to be the one to break the news to anyone. Once I'd confirmed that the officials at the county knew, I called his boss. I got the secretary and, after I made a big fuss about my deadline and wanting to make sure the obituary was as complete as possible, she managed to squeeze me in for the next day. Apparently, Tom Storey, the head county engineer, was a very busy man.

It would take a bit longer for the news to make it around all of Jesse's circle of friends, and I didn't want to hit them right away, so I did some searching in the newspaper archives. If Steve was eighteen, that meant his parents' marriage might have happened around the time the newspaper began to be digitized, so I tried running an online search for their wedding announcement to get Alicia's maiden name. Unfortunately, it turned out that they must have been married a few years before Steve was born, which put them before a computer search did me much good.

But I had the next best thing in my assistant, Charlene Robinson, a former teacher with an encyclopedic knowledge of the people of the town. Both Jesse and Alicia were too young for her to have taught them before she quit work to raise her family, but her husband Royce was on the list of frequent guests Hector had given me. I looked across the room to where she was typing wedding announcements. "Do you know

Jesse or Alicia Martinez?" I asked.

"Oh, that poor man. I assume you're working on his obituary," she said.

Why did we even bother with a newspaper in this town? "You heard already? Yeah. And, to be honest, I'm curious about his death."

"I'm sure it wasn't suicide. But the person to talk to is Royce. He was always over there to watch football and swap barbecue recipes. Jesse was good with brisket, but he could never top Royce's ribs."

"Royce was on the list of frequent guests at his cookouts. I want to talk to some of his friends to get some perspective. Those football and cookout parties seem to be legendary, and that's worth a story."

"I'll call him and tell him to drop by. He can bring lunch, while he's at it. He was babysitting the smoker last night, so I'm sure he's got something. He's been practicing for a turkey for Thanksgiving. Do you have plans for Thanksgiving?"

"I don't know. I'd like to visit my parents in San Antonio, but it depends on how we manage the production schedule that week. I guess we'd have to go to print on Wednesday night, so I may be able to get up early on Thanksgiving morning and get there in time for lunch." It was hard to believe Thanksgiving was coming up. It didn't even really feel like fall yet.

"Well, if there's some reason you can't travel, you're welcome to join us. We've got a big table with plenty of room for more."

"I appreciate that. I'll let you know as soon as I know what's going on."

While she called her husband, I went to the newspaper morgue in the corner of the press room, where Jean was hanging out, listening to the police scanner. It was a pity she wasn't corporeal enough to turn pages so I could put her to work digging through the archives, and

these events would have happened long after her death, so she wouldn't be able to tell me much. However, I could work from the other end with her.

I grabbed the volume I thought most likely to contain the year I wanted, and as I began flipping through the old issues, I asked her, "Was there someone in the sideshow with telekinetic powers?"

"They didn't have any specific telekinesis acts, but there were a few I always suspected of having an ability like that. Like, say, the knife thrower. It was uncanny how accurate he was. He may have been just that good, or either he or his assistant could nudge the knives to go where they wanted them to. I never managed to prove it."

"That's what Wes suspects about the victim's son. He's the kicker on the football team, and it seems that no matter how he kicks, the ball always manages to veer between the uprights."

"You think he killed his dad using his powers?"

"All the doors were locked from the inside, and it looked like a suicide, but that seems unlikely to me. Telekinesis might explain how the killer could have killed him, then locked the doors from outside the house. I don't think the son did it, but there could be a relative who also has that power. That's what I'm trying to track down, but it sounds like it'll be difficult to do if you don't know who in the act might have been manipulating things."

"It could also have been one of the carnies who ran games. It's easy to make sure the suckers can't hit the target and win a prize if you can move the balls or darts, and anyone who inspects the game will be able to hit the target just fine, so they won't find anything shady."

"Which makes it even more difficult to track who might have the power from that angle." Rather than going back to the thirties, I focused on more recent history and skimmed the papers for Jesse's

wedding announcement. I couldn't imagine someone with his personality not having a big blowout wedding, unless maybe Alicia had been in charge of things and had planned a quiet ceremony without any mention in the newspaper.

I still hadn't found the announcement when Charlene came back to tell me that Royce was there. He'd brought smoked turkey and potato salad, and we sat around Charlene's desk to eat. Before we got to the matter at hand, I was asked my verdict on the turkey. "It's good," I said after taking a few bites. "Nice and moist, and there's more flavor than I'm used to from turkey breast."

"This one was brined," he said.

"Took up just about my whole refrigerator," Charlene said, her eye roll contradicted by a fond smile.

"I've also tried a marinade injection."

"That flavor was almost too strong," Charlene put in. "I like my turkey to taste like turkey, and we don't want it clashing with the dressing and gravy."

"So far, I think I like the brining and smoking best for Thanksgiving purposes," Royce said. "But the Cajun injection is really good. I may pick up a few extra turkeys while they're cheap and throw them in the deep freeze to have at other times." He sighed. "Jesse and I had a friendly competition going to see who could do the best turkey. He was going to come over after his family dinner, bringing his own bird, and we were going to let people vote."

"Hector Gutierrez said you were a regular at the cookouts and football parties," I said. "How did you meet Jesse?"

"In the meat department at the supermarket. They had a sale on ribs, and we were both stocking up. We got started talking about how we prepared them—he was wrong and I was giving him tips—and he

invited me over that weekend so I could see how he cooked them. That was how the competition started. It turned out that once you came to one of his parties, you were on the guest list for all of them. He'd send out a group text when he was having people over. I didn't go to all of them, but I'd say I went once or twice a month."

"How often did he have parties?" I asked.

"All the time. If there was a sport on, he had people over. During football season, there was college football on Saturday afternoons and evenings, pro football on Sundays. Sometimes he'd have people over for the Thursday and Monday games, too, but those tended to be smaller, simpler affairs, often just using up leftovers from the other times. They were pretty spontaneous. You'd get a text on that night saying that anyone who wanted to come over was welcome. He'd have people over even in bad weather, as long as it wasn't a nasty storm. There might not be grilling, but we'd stay on the covered part of the porch in the rain, and when it was cold he'd have a fire in the pit and in the outdoor fireplace and he'd serve hot cocoa. In really bad weather, he'd move the party indoors, but then there would be fewer people. He also had people over on about the same schedule for baseball and basketball. He tried a golf party once, but that didn't go so well. And you should have seen his blowouts for the Olympics—he'd have flags and banners all over the yard, and it was two weeks of festivities, complete with opening and closing ceremonies." He shook his head sadly. "I'm really going to miss him."

I could see how an introvert like Alicia might have been driven crazy by that kind of life, seldom having her home to herself without a yard full of guests. "Is that the only time you saw him, at his parties?" I asked.

"It was hard to keep up with him to truly reciprocate, but a lot of us tried to invite him over to dinner on nights when he wasn't hosting or

getting together with his family. I know he hated to be alone, and the divorce was rough on him, so we included him as much as we could. He came to our house about once a month. But he was so busy that he wasn't the sort of friend I'd just call up and chat with. We might occasionally have a conversation at one of the parties, and we'd talk more when he came over, but as much time as I spent with him, I guess I didn't actually know him that well. I was just part of a crowd."

"Did he ever talk about work?"

He frowned. "Not really. I knew where he worked, but he preferred not to drag work into his leisure time. In fact, he had a policy that we didn't talk about work at his parties. He wanted us all to just enjoy ourselves and separate ourselves from our work, something men have trouble doing. But his boss did come to his last party, on Sunday."

That was interesting, considering that Steve had said he'd never seen the boss. "He hadn't come before?" I asked.

"Not that I saw. And Jesse acted like it was a big surprise. It sounded like he'd been inviting his boss all along, and this was the first time he showed up. I've gotta say, I wouldn't have been sad if he never came again—well, if Jesse didn't die and there would be more parties."

"Why?" I asked, my curiosity more than piqued.

"He was intense. Really, really intense. I thought he'd have a stroke or a heart attack. For the most part, we're pretty casual at these parties. The game is mostly background noise. We'll cheer on our favorite teams, and we may pay a bit more attention for the Cowboys, but we don't get that excited. This guy acted like he was taking it personally, like every bad play was a personal insult. He cheered for the good things, but he had a temper tantrum when something went against his team. I'd never seen a grown man act like that. One of the guys teased him about having his life's savings riding on the outcome, and the boss

started screaming at Jesse, asking what he'd told us."

"That seems extreme," I said.

"Yeah, Jesse didn't seem to have any idea what he was talking about. He was manning the grill at the time, so he hadn't even heard the conversation. The boss stormed out after that. I've gotta say, I wasn't sad to see him go, and if there'd been more parties, I suspect Jesse wouldn't have kept inviting him, unless maybe he felt obligated, just to keep things nice at work."

"Did you notice any tension between them before that?"

"Not really. They weren't super friendly. Jesse was more formal and polite with the boss than he usually was with the rest of the guys. He introduced him to all of us. I definitely got the feeling that they weren't work friends. They probably didn't go to lunch together or go for beers after work, or anything like that." He shrugged. "Or they might have. As I said, Jesse didn't talk about work." He frowned. "You don't think the boss did something to him, do you? I thought I heard it was a suicide."

"I'm just curious because I originally called Jesse about something to do with his work. I needed to interview him for a story, and since he lived in Stirling Mills and he was tied up at work, he invited me to come over for burgers in the evening."

"That's so very Jesse," he said with a sad smile. "I'm going to miss him. I hope someone else picks up the baton and carries on the tradition."

"We should host a wake," Charlene said. "We could have people over to our backyard. You can grill something in his honor, and the whole gang can hang out once more. Then you can talk about what to do."

"That's a good idea," he said with a nod. "I'd like that."

“I take it Alicia didn’t come to any of these events,” I said.

He chuckled. “No way. Too many people for her, though sometimes she’d drop by with a cake or a plate of cookies, say hi, and leave. Steve was there a lot, though. Jesse was a great dad. He and his son were really close. I’m impressed with how good a job his parents did on raising him together even after they split up.”

“Do you know how long ago the divorce was?”

“They were already divorced when I met him. It actually took a while for me to figure it out, though. I couldn’t tell that she didn’t live with him until there was bad weather one day and we retreated indoors to watch the rest of the game. There was no sign that a woman lived there. That was when I realized that Alicia was just dropping by, not clearing out to make room for his friends.”

“How long did you know Jesse?”

“I’d say about five years.” He glanced toward Charlene. “Does that sound right?”

“Seems like it. It was before you retired but while you were preparing to retire. That was when you got the first smoker.”

“Is there anything else you need to know?” he asked me.

I got a couple of quotes from him about Jesse’s generosity and ability to create a community that I could use in the obituary, and then we got back to eating. I was now even more curious about the boss. Someone seemed to have hit a nerve about him having a lot riding on that game, or was that just his personality? Working in newsrooms, I’d run into people who acted like that about everything, blowing up over the least slight. I knew plenty of people who might have a total meltdown over something going wrong in a game, even without a dime riding on it, and then get furious if someone accused them of gambling. That didn’t necessarily mean the boss had killed him before he could

talk to me.

But I was curious about the boss. I ran a search on him and didn't find his name in our news archives. There were a few quotes from him in articles in the newspaper from the county seat, and his address showed up in that city when I did a directory search. I couldn't find any link to Stirling Mills, which made it less likely that he had a supernatural talent. Maybe he was just a bad boss. I'd have to be careful when I interviewed him to make sure I didn't set him off. It sounded like sports would be a bad topic for discussion, not the way to break the ice before getting into the interview proper.

I called a few of the other people on the list of frequent guests and got answers similar to what Royce had given me. Most had never met the boss, never discussed work with Jesse. Those who'd been at Sunday's party told the same story Royce had. They hadn't heard the boss mentioned before, didn't know what relationship Jesse had with him. I had to be careful in talking with most of these people, since I was ostensibly interviewing them for Jesse's obituary, not to solve his death.

I was wrapping up for the evening and Charlene had already gone home when Wes came by. He dropped wearily into the guest chair by my desk. "Tea?" I asked him. "You look like you could use some."

"Do you have something without caffeine? I've got an early shift tomorrow."

I managed to hide my smile as I turned to put the electric kettle on and found an herbal tea I knew he liked. I was gradually turning him into a hot tea drinker. "Bad day?" I asked casually as I plopped a tea bag into the mug he usually used.

"Dealing with the aftermath of a death is seldom fun. It's sad, and there's so much paperwork." There was a long pause, and I was

tempted to turn around to face him, but I didn't because it was more likely he'd talk about something sensitive to my back. Finally, he said, "This isn't for publication yet, but it seems like you and Jesse's family were right about it not being a suicide."

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Chapter Seven

I whirled to face Wes. “It was murder?”

“Looks like it. It must have been a slow day in the coroner’s office because we’ve already got preliminary autopsy results. It appeared at the scene like he’d slit his wrists, but I thought the water didn’t look bloody enough. It turns out he actually drowned.”

“Did he maybe slip beneath the water before he bled out?”

He shook his head. “His head was above water when we found him, though his hair was still a bit wet. The cuts were made around the time of death, and it looks like maybe someone pressed on them to try to force out more blood. My guess is the killer drowned him, then tried to make it look like he’d cut his wrists but didn’t realize until too late that you don’t get much bleeding after death.”

The kettle reached a boil, so I turned back to pour hot water into the mug, which I then handed to Wes. “Give it a couple of minutes,” I instructed. “I doubt Jesse started the coals and went to take a bath, so the killer must have filled the tub and ambushed Jesse when he went in to use the bathroom.”

Wes nodded. “There was bruising consistent with a struggle.”

“So the killer must have gone into the house and filled the tub while Jesse was outside setting up, then waited for him, killed him, tried to stage a suicide, and then locked all the doors from the inside once he left. He’d have had to go in through the front door while Jesse was in

back. I'm sure Jesse would have heard the garage door opening if the killer had gone in that way. Are there any security cameras on the street?"

"We're looking into it. Jesse didn't have a doorbell camera. With any luck, the people across the street have one that caught at least a car."

"It would have had to be someone who knew Jesse's habits," I mused. "Otherwise, the odds were good he'd have been caught while Jesse was going in and out, getting set up. It's hard to imagine someone could have made it inside, through the house to the bathroom, and filled up the bathtub while Jesse was home."

"They could have been lying in wait if they got in while he was at work—have the bathtub filled already, then hide out in one of the spare bedrooms."

"How many bathrooms are there in the house?"

"Two. There's a small bathroom in the main bedroom, and then this one in the hall. This house was built before they started making the owners' bathroom luxurious."

I imagined the scenario and how it might have worked. "Okay, so when he comes home and changes into his grilling clothes, he uses his bathroom and doesn't notice that the bathtub in the hall bathroom is full. The killer's either hiding in that bathroom or in one of the bedrooms. Jesse starts setting up for the cookout, puts out the drinks and chips, lights the coals, then comes back inside. He decides to take a quick bathroom break before his guests arrive and doesn't want to go all the way back to his bathroom, or maybe he just wants to make sure the hall bathroom his guests would use is tidy and has clean towels, so he goes in there, the killer ambushes him, shoves him in the tub, drowns him, then cuts his wrists to make it look like a suicide, leaves,

and locks all the doors using his telekinetic powers.”

“Sounds about right,” he said, nodding. “They got a bunch of prints off the patio door, most of them Jesse’s, and his smudged the others that were there, probably from his guests the day before. Nothing had smudged his prints, and it hadn’t been wiped clean, so it’s hard to imagine how anyone other than Jesse could have locked that door, unless they did it without touching it. He could have been paranoid enough to lock the door while he was inside and away from the porch. He was expecting you, so maybe he wanted to make sure a nosy reporter didn’t barge in while he was in the bathroom.”

“Hey!” I protested. “I wouldn’t just barge in like that.”

“You wanted to.”

“Only after he didn’t show up for a while and didn’t answer his phone and we were worried about him. I wouldn’t just walk into someone’s house as soon as I got there. Did they have an approximate time of death? It couldn’t have been that long before we got there, judging by the state of the coals.”

“The body being submerged in water complicated that, but he was probably dead about half an hour before we arrived.”

I couldn’t help but feel a hint of relief to know that Jesse wasn’t being murdered while we were admiring his backyard. He’d been dead before we could have done anything to help. “Which means he wouldn’t have been worried about me showing up while he was in the bathroom, so it’s less likely he would have locked the door.”

“The gates were unlocked, so the backyard wasn’t secure,” he pointed out. “We tell people to keep doors locked. It’s basic security.”

It seemed out of character for what I knew about Jesse. He sounded like an unlocked door kind of guy. “The next question is, who would have wanted Jesse dead? From what I’ve heard, everyone loved him.

He never met a stranger and was nice to everyone. Who would either hate him enough to kill him or benefit from his death? I can't help but think it has something to do with the bridge. He was killed before he could talk to me about it, and he was really careful to sound like he was just inviting me over for one of his cookouts, so I think he was trying to hide the fact that he was talking to a reporter. There must have been something he knew or suspected about someone he worked with."

"Not everyone loved him. There is that neighbor," he pointed out. "She may have seen him preparing for yet another party and snapped."

"But that ruins the ambush theory. She wouldn't have known he was preparing for another party if she got into the house before he got home from work. If she had telekinetic ability, you'd think she'd have used it sooner. She could have really messed with his cookouts by moving things around with her mind."

"From what I understand about her, she'd have wreaked havoc on the neighborhood if she were telekinetic," he said, nodding in agreement. "She's been bad enough that we've had to threaten to file charges against her as a nuisance. She calls the police about everything all her neighbors do. Kids two houses down can't play outside in their own yards without her complaining. Meanwhile, her dog barks constantly, and she gets hostile if anyone says anything about it."

"So, the bridge," I said. "I've scheduled an interview with Jesse's boss tomorrow, supposedly to get information for the obituary, but I'll see how he reacts to mention of the bridge. Oh, it turns out he was at Jesse's last cookout on Sunday. He finally came after being invited all the time, and it didn't go well. Royce said he blew up when someone teased him about being so invested in the game that he must have had a lot riding on it, and he blamed Jesse for saying something."

“Saying what?”

“Royce didn’t know, and he thought Jesse didn’t, either. Jesse wasn’t even by the TV when this came up.”

“Sports betting is illegal in this state, theoretically. I think some of the online stuff is a gray area, and no one bothers to prosecute casual bets among friends. Mayors and governors are always making friendly wagers with other mayors and governors about big rivalry games, and they don’t get busted. But I can see how someone might not be keen on others blabbing about them gambling. The damage would already have been done, though, if that’s what was going on. Killing would be, well, overkill.”

It dawned on me that he was actually sitting in my office, discussing a case with me, instead of withholding information and telling me to stay out of it. “Maybe that’s just his personality,” I said, trying to maintain the same tone instead of revealing my emotions about what I’d just realized. “I’ve known people who get that intense about something and then resent being called out on it, but I’ll get a better sense of what he’s like tomorrow.”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention the fact that it was murder. You can put it in the newspaper because that doesn’t come out until Friday and I think it’s only fair to the family to clarify publicly that it wasn’t a suicide, but I’ll be interviewing the boss as part of my investigation, and I’d like the chance to spring that on him so I can see his reaction.”

“Okay, fair enough,” I said, trying not to sound grudging. I had to admit that it made sense to let the police tell so the reaction could be part of the official investigation. It was enough that Wes had let me know in time to get the information into this week’s issue. Since he was including me in something he’d normally keep me out of, I felt I owed

him the same favor in return. “There is something else. Jesse’s already haunting his grill. He was there last night. I couldn’t talk to him with all those people there, but he seemed to be aware of us. He reacted to things we said. I was thinking about going over there again and trying to talk to him.”

“We can go tonight.”

“We?” I still felt weird about talking to ghosts in front of people, even though he’d seen me do it before.

“With me there, you’re assisting in an investigation. Without me, you’re trespassing, and believe me, the neighbor will call the police if she notices you there. She might hear you talking from the backyard.”

“It sounds like she’s the one in that neighborhood you’d expect to find murdered.”

“And it would be a *Murder on the Orient Express* scenario—the whole neighborhood pitching in and all of them having motives. It might actually count as civic improvement—and please don’t quote me on that. I don’t want to give anyone any ideas, and if she did get killed, I would investigate it with the same rigor as I investigate any case.”

“Then the ‘she needed killing’ defense would be up to the jury to weigh?”

“Exactly. So, tonight? Haven’t you said dusk is prime ghost-hunting time?”

“Yeah, and that’s pretty early at this time of year.”

“Does six sound good to you?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll pick you up.” He set down his mug on my desk and stood. “Thanks for the tea and the chat. You’ve been helpful.”

I was left wondering once again if this was going to be some kind of

date or just an investigation.

WES WAS STILL in uniform when he stopped by in his police vehicle later that evening, so we looked properly official. He drove down the alley and parked in the driveway, presumably so the neighbors wouldn't notice the police vehicle or us coming and going, and we entered the backyard. It looked sad and quiet without the strings of lights lit and with all the party supplies cleared away. There were a few floodlights on the yard, so it wasn't completely dark, but they didn't have the cheery warmth of the lights that had been on when Jesse was set up for a party.

"Is he here?" Wes asked softly.

"No," I said. "But I bet if we sit down and act like we're guests, he'll show up."

Whoever had cleaned up from the party hadn't put the cushions from the patio furniture away. We sat down and waited for our host to appear. As I expected, Jesse's ghost soon left the house as though he'd come out through the sliding patio door, and he headed for the grill. He was dressed the way I'd seen him the night before, in a Cowboys jersey and apron. At first, he didn't acknowledge us as he poured charcoal into the grill, arranged it just so, added some wood chips, and lit the pile of coals—all of his grilling supplies ghostly rather than real. The actual grill remained closed and cold, though I thought I could detect a whiff of smoke.

Finally, he turned to face us. "Oh, you're here already," he said. "I wasn't expecting you until seven. It'll take a little while before the coals are ready for the burgers. In the meantime, help yourself to some drinks and snacks. There's beer and sodas in the tub and some chips and pretzels. I'm afraid it's all leftovers from yesterday, so the bags

have been opened, but they should still be pretty fresh.”

Jesse had been a Hispanic man in his mid-forties, with a compact build like his son's. In fact, I imagined his son would look a lot like him when he grew up, and Jesse had probably looked a lot like Steve when he was a teen. “Hi, Jesse,” I said, feeling self-conscious doing this in front of Wes. To him, I'd look like I was talking to myself. “I'm Lexie. You invited me over to talk about the bridge.”

“No talking business until after dinner,” he said. “Normally, I try not to talk business at all at home, but I'm making an exception tonight. We'll eat, then talk.” He turned to check the grill, then said, “I'll go get some things together in the house. Make yourself at home.” He headed back to the house, motioned as though he was opening the sliding door, and disappeared through the door. I shivered with the realization that he was probably reliving his final moments, going inside to do whatever he'd done the last night of his life.

“He seems to think it's last night,” I reported to Wes. “He's replaying it. Can you get into the house so we could follow him and see what happens?”

“Unfortunately, I don't have a key, and I'd rather not call Steve or Alicia about this.”

“I understand. Maybe he'll come back out.”

Jesse's ghost reappeared a few minutes later, and the same scene repeated, with him lighting the grill, noticing me, and then going back inside. The next time he came out, I stood in front of the grill, hoping to avoid repeating the loop. “Jesse, I need to know what you have to say about the bridge. It's important.”

“Dinner first,” he said. “I'll go inside and get the burgers.”

I groaned in frustration. “This is going nowhere,” I said to Wes. “He's stuck in a loop.”

I tried a different approach the next time he came out. I went over to stand beside him at the grill and said, “Steve’s a great kid. It seems like you’ve taught him a lot. He told me about the car you gave him and how you rebuilt it together.”

He turned to me with a grin. “Yeah? He told you about that? I didn’t know how he’d take being told he was getting a car and then seeing that old junker, but it looks great now. I just wish he wasn’t so mad at me. He hasn’t spoken to me in weeks.”

That was news. Steve hadn’t mentioned anything about being on the outs with his father. “Oh?” I said. “He didn’t seem mad at you when I talked to him.”

“We had a fight. He wanted more money, and I wanted him to get a job. After football season, of course, since I know he’s busy now, but he needs to show some responsibility. I pay for everything he needs—gas, car insurance, food, clothing, even spending money. He’s on track to get a football scholarship, so I don’t know what he needs money for, and he won’t tell me. When I said he needed to tell me before I just handed over money, he stormed out.”

“I don’t think he holds it against you now,” I said, then hoped that didn’t reassure him so much that it allowed him to move on to the next plane of existence. I still had questions for him.

“I’ll go inside and get the burgers,” he said, and he was off repeating his loop, like we’d never talked.

Before he returned and started over again, I told Wes, “It sounds like he and his son had a fight. They hadn’t been speaking for a while. It was about money. Steve needed money for something and Jesse wouldn’t just hand it over, told him he had to get a job after football season.”

“Wow. I didn’t get that impression from Steve last night,” Wes said.

“Neither did I. Steve just talked about what a great relationship they had. I asked him if he was at Sunday’s cookout and he said he had something else going on. I guess he wouldn’t necessarily want to talk about their rift the night of his father’s death, but I didn’t get any impression at all that they’d been on the outs.”

“And I didn’t pick up anything from him, but there were a lot of people there and a lot of heightened emotions, so I didn’t hear any one thing, just a jumble. I’ll have to see if I can find a way to dig it out when I do my official interviews with Alicia and Steve.”

“I guess they’re suspects, huh?”

“Family members usually are. We fear strangers, but you’re more likely to be killed by someone close to you.”

“I hate to think that Steve might have killed his father over money.”

“He doesn’t seem the type. He has a few speeding tickets on his record, but no more than you’d expect from a teenager with a powerful car. Otherwise, he doesn’t seem to have been in any trouble. He’s busy with sports and he has a dad who’s involved with his life. That limits the amount of time he has for trouble.”

Before I could respond, Jesse was back to light the coals again. “I know you’re concerned about that bridge,” I said to him, giving it one more try. “That’s why you wanted to talk to me away from the office. Did your boss have anything to do with it? I know things didn’t go so well when he came to your last party.”

“No talking work until after we eat,” he said. “Relax and enjoy yourself. We’ve got plenty of time to talk.”

We didn’t. We were already out of time, and that’s why this was so frustrating. What was the point of having the ability to communicate with ghosts if they couldn’t tell me anything useful? Out of desperation, I said, “Jesse, who killed you? Did you see who it was?”

He didn't seem to have heard me. "Now I'll go get the burgers ready," he said. "Make yourselves at home. Have a drink and some chips. The remote's on the table if you want to turn the TV on." He headed back into the house. I ran after him and peered through the glass door into the house once he vanished. I couldn't see him inside.

I shook my head as I returned to Wes. "I'm afraid it's pointless. He's just reliving the evening over and over again, and he won't talk about anything work-related. If we could follow him inside, we might learn something, though it's possible he just disappears when he goes inside. I don't see him in there. He might be blinking away before the fateful moment."

"You did get something useful out of this, the fact that he had a rift with his son, and you know his son is telekinetic. Well, that part isn't much use in a police investigation. But I've got some avenues I might be able to follow. It'll be natural for me to ask Alicia what Steve's relationship with his father was like and if they'd had any disagreements lately, and whatever she says may give me something to use when I talk to Steve." He got out of the patio chair and said, "I'd better get you home."

Which meant this was in no way a date. I'd been hoping he'd suggest we get dinner on the way back, but I tried not to let my disappointment show on the ride back to my place. When he stopped in front of the newspaper office, he turned toward me, and my heartbeat sped up slightly in anticipation of what he might say. He leaned closer, and I held my breath. "Lex, when you interview the boss tomorrow, remember that the case you're working on is the bridge. You're not trying to solve the murder. That's my job. The two might be connected, so I'm keeping you in the loop, and I hope you'll do likewise, but don't get involved in the murder investigation."

I deflated like a week-old party balloon. Fighting to hide my

disappointment, I said, “I already agreed not to bring up the murder when I talk to him. But since he thinks I’m just talking to him to get information for Jesse’s obituary, there is a chance I could learn something relevant to the murder investigation.”

“Then I hope you’ll share it with me. But no leading questions to try to get anything about the murder.”

“Of course not. I do know how to do my job.” I got out of his truck, slammed the door, and entered the newspaper office. After locking up and setting the alarm, I went upstairs to my apartment, where I mulled over my conversation with Jesse’s ghost to keep myself from stewing over the conversation with Wes as I microwaved a frozen entree. What might Steve have needed money for that was so sensitive that he couldn’t tell his father about it, and was it worth killing over?

Chapter Eight

The next morning, I headed to the county seat to interview Jesse's boss at the engineering department. As I drove, I couldn't help but mull over the case. I hated the idea of it, but Steve seemed a likely suspect in his father's murder. It sounded like he had a motive, and he'd shown no signs of there having been a rift with his father, even after his death. I knew people grieved in different ways, but his reaction seemed off, given what I now knew. Even if he didn't want to admit the rift, I'd have expected to see some sign of guilt for the way he'd left things with his father. Justifying the killing in the first place would have required convincing himself that he was in the right, so he might not have felt bad. He might even be able to suppress his guilt enough to get past Wes's mind-reading ability.

I wondered what he needed money for that he couldn't tell his father about. Those speeding tickets? Maybe there had been conditions attached to the car, like he'd get it taken away if he got a ticket, so he needed help paying the fines but didn't want to tell about the tickets. But Jesse had said he paid the insurance, so surely he'd have noticed if his rates went up because of a speeding ticket. A young man with a few moving violations would be expensive to insure.

As I passed the football stadium on the way out of town, I remembered Wes's suspicion that Steve was using his telekinetic ability to improve his accuracy as a kicker. Could someone be blackmailing him about that? After a little thought, I dismissed the idea. Only

someone from Stirling Mills would even believe such a thing was possible, and they probably wouldn't be too upset about something that helped their team. Someone from outside the town, like the league officials, would laugh at the accusation. It would be impossible to prove. There were likely other people in town with the same gift, so anyone in the stadium might be influencing the ball. In fact, it was probably a miracle that it didn't overcorrect with multiple people urging it to go the right way.

I supposed there were a number of other kinds of trouble a teenager could get into that would require money. I wondered if Steve had a girlfriend. A pregnant teenage girlfriend would require money, no matter how she dealt with the pregnancy, and I could see how Steve would be reluctant to tell his father about that. But I was sure that was the sort of thing Wes would get into in his official interview. My concern for the moment was Jesse's boss, and he was possibly connected to both the murder and the bridge collapse. He was new enough that he hadn't been with the department when the bridge was built, but he could have been involved in a cover-up.

The county seat was a slightly larger small town about ten miles down the road from Stirling Mills, but I imagined in about a decade their positions would be reversed. Stirling Mills was growing, but it looked like this town was shrinking. About the only thing it had going for it was the county government. The county courthouse dominated the downtown, sitting in a square ringed by mostly empty storefronts. It was an ornate monstrosity built out of the local white limestone, the kind of building that should have a single lamp lit in the tower while a woman in a nightgown fled from it. I hoped there were bats living in the tower. It looked like a place that should have bats.

Unfortunately, my meeting wasn't in the interesting old building. The engineering department was based in a featureless brick cube a few

blocks away. The interior was just as uninspiring as the exterior, with walls somewhere between dingy white and faded yellow and gray linoleum floors. A receptionist at a desk in the lobby sent me up to the engineering department without asking for any identification or even really looking up from her book to notice who I was. It seemed security wasn't much of a concern.

I boarded an elevator covered in vinyl paneling grained like wood—like the trim on an old station wagon—and found the engineering department, where there was yet another receptionist. “Hi, I’m Lexie Lincoln, here to see Mr. Storey,” I said.

She was a lot friendlier than the receptionist downstairs. “Hi!” she said, bright and perky. “I understand you’re here to talk about Jesse.” Her bright perkiness faded, and her lower lip trembled slightly. “That’s such a sad situation. We’ll really miss him around here,” she said, her voice breaking.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” I said. “Had you known him long?”

“Ever since I came to work here, so about five years. He’d been here forever. I don’t think he’d worked anywhere else. He was such a nice guy. He was always bringing food in for lunch. There aren’t a lot of restaurants around here anymore, but we almost never had to go out to lunch because Jesse would bring in brisket and burgers, and the like. I guess they were leftovers from all his parties.”

“I hear those were legendary. Did you ever go to any?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Not to the sports parties. He invited me, but I got the impression it was a guys’ thing, and hanging around with a bunch of men yelling about football and eating red meat isn’t exactly my scene. I did go to some of the parties he had for holidays, though. His July Fourth party was a real event, and he had a lovely Christmas party.”

No one had mentioned those holiday parties to me, and I made a mental note. “Were those office parties, for coworkers?” I asked.

“Oh, no. They seemed to involve everyone he knew, and I think he pretty much knew everyone.” She glanced down at her phone and said, “It looks like Tom’s on the phone. Can I get you something while you wait? Some water or coffee?”

“No thanks, I’m fine,” I said. Through an open office door nearby, I spotted a pennant for the Stirling Mills football team. I wandered casually over there. “This must be Jesse’s office.”

“Yes,” she said with a soft sob. “We’ll need to clear it out eventually, separate his work stuff from his personal belongings and get those back to his family.”

A photo of Jesse, Alicia, and Steve dominated the bookcase on the wall behind Jesse’s desk. There was also a wedding picture of him and Alicia. I wondered what he’d thought about the divorce. It hadn’t sounded like he’d been the one who was unhappy in the marriage. If he liked having people around, living alone must have been terrible for him. No wonder he had so many parties. From the way Alicia talked, they’d made it work. If he still had their wedding photo in his office, either he’d never given up on her or he’d wanted it to look to his coworkers like they were still together. I wondered if they even knew about the divorce.

“From what I understand, he was really proud of his son. They must have had a great relationship,” I said.

“Oh, yes, they were very close. Jesse was always talking about Steve. He left work early on Fridays to be able to get to his football games, and he’d always take off when he could for school events. He didn’t miss a thing.” She shook her head sadly. “That’s why this is all so hard to believe.”

I was still trying to think of a way to ask her if there'd been anything he might have been worried about without sounding like there was something I knew when a man came to the doorway of one of the other offices. "You must be Ms. Lincoln," he said. Stepping forward, he extended a hand and said, "Tom Storey."

I took his hand to shake it and found myself caught in a fierce grip. "I'm Lexie. Thank you for seeing me," I said.

He finally released my hand, and I resisted the urge to try to rub some feeling back into it. "I just hate that it has to be under these circumstances." He gestured toward his office door. "Please come in and have a seat. Did Paula offer you something to drink? The coffee here isn't so bad, really."

In my view, there was no such thing as not-bad coffee, but I kept my opinion to myself. "Yes, she did, but I'm fine," I said, entering the office. I took the seat in front of the desk and got my notebook out of my purse while he closed his office door and went around to sit behind his desk.

My first impression of his office was that he and Jesse should have gotten along well. I'd known sports reporters who had less sports memorabilia in their workspaces. The walls were covered in pennants; framed, autographed jerseys; and autographed pictures of him with various sports figures—the kind you paid to get taken at fan events. The bookcase contained football helmets, baseballs sitting on stands, footballs, basketballs, and baseball bats. All the Texas professional teams were represented, along with most of the major Texas universities and the local high school. It didn't look like he was a partisan for any one team. He just liked sports and, apparently, meeting athletes—or maybe making it look like he had connections with famous athletes.

Tom looked like he was about five years younger than Jesse, with only the slightest hints of gray showing at his temples in brownish hair that had probably once been blond, and I never would have guessed he was an engineer. He looked more like the sort of guy who'd have been a business major at my university, probably inheriting or going to work at his family business while considering himself to be a self-made man. He struck me as slick. I wouldn't have bought a car from him. He was dressed in the business-casual cool-weather uniform of khakis and long-sleeved button-down shirt, but he had the aura of a designer suit about him. He folded his hands together on top of his desk and said, "Now, how can I help you today?"

"As I mentioned on the phone, I'm working on the obituary for Jesse Martinez, and I wanted to get some insight into how he was at work."

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm surprised you're going to this much effort for an obituary for someone who wasn't very prominent. You're really going above and beyond."

I'd never had anyone I was interviewing for an obituary say anything like that in my whole career, whether or not the interview was my excuse for investigating something else. After a mental "Wow!" I gave him a tight smile and said, "Stirling Mills is a really small town, and he was a rather well-known citizen to us. Everyone in town seemed to know and love him. All those people will want to see his life given the proper respect in the newspaper."

"Oh, yeah, all those parties. I guess he was quite the local fixture."

"Did you ever go to any of them?"

"Not really. I think it's best not to mix my work and social lives. It can get awkward when the boss socializes with employees. If I went to his parties, I'd have to spend equal time with the rest of the staff."

"Oh, I thought you were at his cookout on Sunday. That was one of

the reasons I wanted to interview you, since it sounded like you knew him well.” Okay, I was twisting the truth a little, since I’d learned he was at the cookout after I’d made the appointment.

He blinked and flinched like he was taken aback, then he smiled and said, “Yes, well, I did go that one time. He finally wore me down. I’m glad I did now. I think I’d have regretted it after he died if I’d never gone to one of his parties.” He hesitated, and I could see the calculations going on behind his eyes before he said, “And I think I proved my point about it being best for me to not socialize with my staff. I got a bit intense about the way a game was going. Jesse might not have seen me the same way professionally after seeing the way I am socially.”

I had to give him credit for finding a way to hedge his bets in case I’d heard details from others who were at that party without confessing anything if I hadn’t yet heard. He could claim not to be hiding anything even as he told me nothing. I didn’t know how good of an engineer he was, but he definitely had a future in government.

“I’ve heard a lot from people in Stirling Mills about his social side, but I wanted to talk to you about the professional side of his life,” I said. “What can you tell me about him at work?”

“He was the core of our department,” he said. “He was here when I got here, and he was instrumental in showing me the ropes. He was dedicated to doing the right thing and took his job very seriously. He wanted to make sure our county had safe roads and bridges.”

I jotted that down, since that was exactly the sort of quote I needed for the article. I then paused, my pen held above the notebook, waiting to see if he’d fill the silence. That was an old journalists’ trick. Most people can’t stand silence, so they’ll talk to fill it, and you get some of the best stuff that way because the desperation to fill silence often

overcomes any internal filters.

“You haven’t heard anything about what happened to him, have you?” he asked. “All Alicia said when she called to say he wouldn’t be coming to work was that he was dead.”

This would have been the perfect opportunity to drop the bombshell that Jesse was murdered, but I wouldn’t violate Wes’s trust in me—feeble though it often seemed to be—by spilling the beans. I settled for saying, “The police generally aren’t all that forthcoming about that sort of information during an investigation. I hope to have something more concrete before I go to press later this week.”

He nodded, then shook his head sadly. “I just can’t imagine what might have happened. He’s not that much older than I am, but he seemed healthy, in spite of all that red meat in his diet. He gave every impression of being happy, and everyone loved him.”

“Is there anything else you need me to know about him?” So far, this interview hadn’t been worth the drive, especially if you took it on face value as merely being about the obituary. I could have done it over the phone, and I hoped he didn’t realize that.

“Not that I can think of. He was a valued employee, and he’ll be missed. Maybe the county will have to name a road or a bridge for him—one of the ones he was involved with.”

“I’m sure his family would like that.” I closed my notebook. “I think I’ve got what I need. Thank you for your time.”

“I’m glad I could help. It’s nice to know that Jesse’s life will be recognized. Please let me know if you need anything else.”

“Do you have a professional headshot of Jesse? I’d like to run a photo with the article, and I’d rather not disturb the family to get photos from them.”

“Paula can help you with that,” he said.

I thanked him again, slid my notebook and pen into my purse, and stood. At the door, I stopped and turned back. “Oh, you wouldn’t happen to know anything about the investigation into the collapsed bridge, would you? Jesse made an appointment with me to talk about it the day he died, but he was dead when I arrived for the interview.”

He looked like someone had taken the baseball bat off his bookcase and clobbered him in the head with it. He’d started to rise to show me out, but he fell back into his chair. “The bridge? He wanted to talk to you about the bridge?”

“I wanted to talk to him about the bridge. I’m working on a story about what happened and what’s being done about it. He said he was busy at work, and since he lived in Stirling Mills, he could save me the trip and I could just come over to his house in the evening. He was going to grill burgers for me, but he wasn’t around when I got there.”

Now that he’d had a chance to recover, Tom was positively giddy, grinning like he’d had good news. “I’m not sure how much he could have told you. The investigation is still in process. We’ve sent samples of materials off to an independent lab, but as far as I can tell, it met all the specs and passed every inspection. It may be that the original design and specs were flawed. I’m afraid Jesse’s death is going to hamper that investigation because he knew more about that bridge than I did. It was his project. It was built before I was hired.” He frowned. “I wonder if that had something to do with his death. I know he was very upset when that bridge collapsed.”

I would have loved to ask more about the bridge, like who’d drawn the plans and set up the specifications and who was involved in taking bids for the project and selecting the contractors, but that was beyond the scope of this interview, and I got the feeling he wouldn’t deal well with me asking more questions right now. I also didn’t want to show my hand until I knew enough to know when I might have caught him

in a lie. “I’d appreciate it if you’d keep me posted on that investigation,” I said, taking one of my business cards out of my jacket pocket and returning to his desk to hand it to him. “I do still want to do a story on it. That bridge is a lifeline for the community in that area, and my readers will want to know what’s going on with that.”

He took the card, glanced at it, then set it on his desk. “Of course. I’ll make sure you’re on the list when we issue the findings from the investigation. Now, is there anything else I can do for you?”

I knew when I was being dismissed, so I smiled and said, “No, you’ve been quite helpful.” He didn’t bother to get up to show me out. He looked to me like he was too shaky to trust his legs.

I stopped at the receptionist’s desk on my way out, but just as I reached her, the phone rang. She connected the call to Tom’s phone, saying, “It’s Ralph from ACR Construction.”

I could hear Tom’s voice coming from his office, saying, “Really?” He sounded alarmed. Then his tone changed abruptly when he said, “Thanks, transfer it.” She pushed a button, and he said, “Hey, Ralph, I was just about to call you. Just a sec.” He got up from his desk and shut his office door.

“Did you get what you needed?” Paula asked.

“Tom said you could get me a photo of Jesse. I need one to run with the obituary.”

“We have his professional headshot. I can e-mail it to you, or we’ve got a print.”

“E-mail would be perfect, thanks.” I gave her my business card so she’d have my address, thanked her again, and headed back to my car. I wasn’t quite sure what to make of that interview. Tom struck me as shady, and I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he’d found a way to give the contract to a crony, but he hadn’t been around at the time, and he’d

been truly stunned to find out that Jesse had wanted to talk to me about the bridge. And then he'd been weirdly relieved. At the same time, he didn't seem to have had any idea how Jesse had died. He'd never slipped to indicate that he thought it might be suicide or that someone had killed him, unless that last thing he'd said about Jesse and the bridge was meant to imply he thought Jesse had committed suicide, though I supposed it could also have hinted at murder or even just a stress-induced heart attack.

Which meant there might be something going on with the bridge, but I was no closer to the truth for the murder.

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Chapter Nine

I'd planned to pick up something at a drive-through and eat lunch in my car while I drove back to Stirling Mills, but Paula was right about there not being a lot of places to eat nearby. None of the usual national fast-food chains were present in the county seat. I had to wait until I got back to Stirling Mills to get lunch, and at that point I just decided to wait to eat at my desk, though I did sneak a fry or two while I waited at stoplights. Back at the office, I'd just finished eating while reading the articles the freelancers had turned in when the bells on the office door jingled. I looked up to see Alicia Martinez entering.

She glanced between Charlene and me, then said, "Uh, is this where I turn in an obituary?"

"Hi, Alicia," I said, standing and coming around my desk to meet her. "I'm Lexie Lincoln. We met the other night."

"Oh, yes," she said, but I wasn't sure she was able to place me. I could imagine that night was a blur in her mind.

"If you'd like to have a seat, we can discuss the obituary." I escorted her to the chair next to my desk, where Wes usually sat when he dropped by.

She sat, then handed me a piece of paper. "This was what I could think of. You may want to edit it. Or would you like me to e-mail it? I can do that, too."

"E-mail would be helpful, but you can do that later," I said. "I was

actually working on an obituary. I've interviewed some of his friends and coworkers. But this information will be helpful. I was going to call to see if I could get some of the details, but I didn't want to bother you. His office sent his professional headshot photo, so I've got that, unless there's a different photo you'd like me to use that you could send me."

Her eyes widened. "You're writing a real article about him?"

"He seems to have been a fairly well-known citizen, and then there are the circumstances of his death, which automatically makes it newsworthy."

"You know it was a murder, not a suicide, right?"

"Yes, the police gave me that information, and it will be part of the article. It's common to focus on the victim when reporting on a murder."

"So it's not so much an obituary as it is an article about a murder."

"We can do both. There will be information about him in the article about the murder, and we can have a formal obituary notice in that section, with details on the funeral service."

"That would be good. I'd like it to look as normal as possible." She paused, then added, "You don't have to mention that I was his ex-wife. You can just call me a wife. It was only a legal technicality."

"Okay," I said.

"The divorce merely means that I'm not in line to inherit anything from him, and we had no community property. Everything goes to Steve." With a wry smile, she added, "Which, I suppose, means I might be less of a suspect, since I don't really have a motive. I don't even work as a vengeful ex-wife."

But it did mean Steve was a suspect, since it meant he inherited at least a house, as well as whatever other assets his father had. "How is

Steve holding up?" I asked. "This must all be so difficult for him. It sounds like he and his father were pretty close."

"He's been quiet, but then that's a teenage boy for you. He's not going to talk about his feelings. And he's keeping busy. I told him he didn't have to go to school, but the team's in the playoffs and he doesn't want to let them down. He has to go to school to go to practice, and he wants to go to practice to get ready for the game Friday. He's been talking about wanting to move in to his dad's house once the police clear it as a crime scene. He doesn't want to sell it. I've tried explaining that we may not be able to afford to keep two houses without his father's salary. It will depend on whether there's enough money in his estate to pay off the house, but then there are the property taxes. I guess I could sell my house and move in to his, but to be honest, I'm not sure how I feel about living in a house someone else owns where I have no stake or rights, and it becomes even dicier after he leaves for college. He's eighteen, so I can't stop him from moving out and living on his own, though I think that's a bad idea while he's still in high school."

"He's probably not thinking clearly right now," I said. "I can see how he might not want to let his father's house go."

"It is nicer than mine. At least, the yard is. I'm not set up for big backyard barbecues—on purpose. And if Steve wants to continue that tradition, I'm not sure I could go back to that life and live there with him. But I don't think we can afford to keep both houses on my salary." She sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to burden you with this. All these thoughts have been swirling around in my head, and they just seem to have come tumbling out. They gave me the week off from work, so I haven't even had that to keep me busy or my coworkers to talk to."

"No worries," I assured her. But I was worried. I hated the idea of Steve being the killer, but it wasn't looking good for him. "There is one

thing you might be able to help me with, though. The night Jesse was killed, I was there because he'd set up an interview with me to talk about that bridge that collapsed in the storm. I got the impression he didn't want to discuss it at work. Did he say anything to you about it?"

"I'm afraid not. At least, not since the collapse. He had a policy of not talking about work away from work, and we hadn't spoken much in the previous week. It wasn't a deliberate not speaking. We were just both busy and our paths didn't cross between that storm and his death. But he did mention some concerns back when the bridge was being built. He wasn't sure they were following the right specifications, but he couldn't get anyone to listen to him about it." Frowning, she added, "Do you think that had anything to do with his murder? It does seem suspicious that he arranged to talk to a reporter but then was killed before he could."

"I have wondered," I said. "I interviewed his boss this morning for the obituary, but when I asked about the bridge, he was surprised that Jesse was talking to me about it, and he didn't seem to know anything about it."

"Oh, his boss," she said, rolling her eyes. "He's utterly useless. When they hired him, Jesse's workload doubled because he had to keep doing his own work while cleaning up after his boss. Tom's good at managing upward. His bosses think he's great because he takes credit for everything his staff does, and meanwhile he doesn't do much of anything. That was one of the few things Jesse talked about at home. When that position came open, Jesse applied for it, and it seemed a shoo-in that he'd get it because he'd been working there so long, he knew the department, and everyone liked him, but then they hired this new guy from outside, with less experience. I think he had connections in the state legislature, and the county officials thought that might come in handy. That was just after the bridge was built, and I wonder if

Jesse raising all those red flags had something to do with him not getting the promotion. He probably annoyed someone in power.” She gave a dry chuckle. “It sounds like Jesse had motive to do away with him, rather than the other way around. I still can’t think of any reason why someone would want to kill Jesse, unless maybe he was on the verge of revealing something about that bridge.”

Or unless someone stood to inherit a house and some money, but I didn’t want to say that to her. I didn’t want it to be true.

Shaking her head as though to clear it, she stood and said, “I’ve taken up enough of your time. I’ll e-mail you that article and maybe some photos, if I can find something. Otherwise, just use the headshot, though it won’t look anything like the Jesse everyone knew. Where should I send it?”

I handed her a business card. “Here. And you can call if there’s anything else you need.”

She tucked it into her purse. “Thank you for being so understanding.”

“Would you mind me talking to Steve? I’d like to get a quote from him, but I understand that it might be more than he can deal with right now. He could just e-mail me something, if he doesn’t want to talk.”

“I’ll check with him and pass on your information. He might be glad of the opportunity to talk about his dad.”

“Thanks.”

When she was gone, Charlene said, without looking up from her work, “You know, we do have a police department in this town. It’s their job to investigate murders.”

“I’m not investigating a murder,” I said. “I was just letting her vent. And Wes asked me to look into the bridge. It’s out of his jurisdiction.”

“You don’t need to talk to the kid to investigate the bridge.”

“I really do just want a quote from him, and I gave the option for him to e-mail me something, so it doesn’t have to be an interview.”

She arched an eyebrow and kept typing.

I hated suspecting Steve, but he looked like the best bet at the moment. He stood to gain from his father’s death and had been on the outs with his father. I knew he had some telekinetic ability, and he had access to the house. The boss had been my other suspect. If he’d been involved in whatever scheme had resulted in a failed bridge, he might have tried to stop Jesse from talking to me and set up the murder to look like suicide to frame him for the bridge, making it look like the guilt was too much, but Tom had seemed truly stunned to find out that Jesse was talking to me about the bridge, and he didn’t seem to know whether the death had been either murder or suicide, or possibly something else.

Though it was weird how relieved he was to find out Jesse was talking to me about the bridge. Had he known Jesse was talking to me at all, and if so, what did he think he’d be talking to a reporter about, if not the bridge? That had been a weird reaction.

I couldn’t wander in to Wes’s office at the police station and start chatting the way he did to me, since I’d have to get past the desk sergeant, but I wanted to bounce this information off him, or at least let him know before he talked to Tom. That was a good enough excuse to call, I decided, so I called Wes’s cell phone.

“What’s up, Lex?” he answered.

“I talked to Tom Storey this morning, and he responded oddly when I brought up the bridge.” I described how the encounter had gone, then added, “I thought I’d let you know before you talked to him so you could use that as you see fit.”

“That is weird,” he said, and I could picture his puzzled frown. “So he was *glad* to find out you were planning to talk to Jesse about the bridge?”

“He could have been glad to find out we didn’t get a chance to talk before Jesse died, I guess, but I got the impression the bridge was the surprising part.”

“Unfortunately, the bridge is still out of my jurisdiction.”

“Unless it has something to do with the murder. And I didn’t give him any indication that I knew anything about the cause of death. It didn’t seem like he knew, either. He didn’t hint at thinking it was suicide. He mentioned a lot of red meat, so he may even think it was natural causes.”

“Thanks for letting me know,” he said. “I was just about to call and ask him to come in, but I think it might work better if I just show up there. I don’t want to give him the chance to come up with a story.”

“If you find anything interesting, let me know.”

“I will, if it has anything to do with the bridge.”

Speaking of the bridge, it was about time I did some more serious investigation about that. I found the article from a few years ago about it being opened. There was something familiar about one of the contractor names, and then I realized that was the phone call Tom had received while I was talking to the receptionist after our interview. That alone wasn’t suspicious. The same contractors probably worked on plenty of county projects and had good reasons to call the head of the county engineering department. What was suspicious was that he’d jumped up to close the door before talking to the contractor.

Granted, I’d probably do that if I had a reporter in my office, just as I wouldn’t leave any papers out on my desk because any decent reporter can read upside down, but that was because I know that

people like me are always on the lookout for a possible story, and most reporters don't have my knack for just stumbling into news. But would an innocent person who wasn't familiar with typical reporters bother to shut the door to talk to someone about regular business? In a town like the county seat, interaction with the press probably mostly involved sending out an announcement about what was going on and then the paper just printing it.

On the other hand, my predecessor hadn't been that kind of reporter. He'd loved digging for scandals. If he'd ever interviewed Tom, I couldn't entirely blame Tom for being paranoid about the media.

"Finding any good dirt?" Jean asked, appearing beside my desk.

"I wonder if that's the issue—they built the bridge on a bad foundation," I said. Fortunately, Charlene had the same gift for seeing and hearing ghosts that I had, so I didn't have to worry about my assistant thinking I was talking to myself or to thin air.

"It's a real shame about that bridge," Charlene said, shaking her head. "There's definitely something fishy about it. A brand-new bridge shouldn't fall down like that."

"I was supposed to interview our murder victim about that. I tried interviewing his ghost, but he seems to be stuck in a loop of what happened before he died. He's setting up the grill, says he won't talk about business until we've eaten, he goes inside, and then comes out again and starts over."

"Oh, that kind of ghost," Charlene said, nodding.

"There are kinds of ghosts?"

"Not kinds of ghosts," Jean said. "But ghosts react to the living world in different ways. It all depends on their personality and what ties them to this world. I'm stuck here because it's the newspaper that ties me to this world. I don't want to leave it. Your murder victim may

be stuck reliving that night because he's trying to resolve it."

"Like when you rewatch a sad movie over and over, and every time there's a part of you that wants it to turn out differently," Charlene said.

"I wonder if there's a way to break him out of the loop," I mused. "Give him a chance to get past the part of the evening when he got killed, as though the rest of it actually plays out. He won't talk to me about work until we've eaten dinner, but he gets killed before we have the chance to talk, and then he resets and starts all over again. He did seem different that first night when other people were there, so he might just be reliving it because of me. Maybe if I bring a burger over and eat it with him there, he'll think he's already grilled burgers and will be willing to talk shop, so I can find out what he wanted me to know."

"It could work," Jean said with a nod. "It's certainly worth a try. It might even help him move on, unless maybe he wants to stick around to watch over his kid."

"Assuming his kid wasn't the one who killed him."

Charlene gasped. "Surely you don't think that!"

"His son has telekinetic abilities, so he may have been able to lock the doors from outside the house. He and his father were on the outs. They hadn't spoken for weeks before Jesse was killed. Steve needed money for something and wouldn't tell his father what. That's why Steve was mad at him. And now Steve inherits everything."

"That would put him at the top of my suspect list," Jean said.

"Steve may have been mad, but that boy loved his dad," Charlene said.

"People do stupid things when they need money," Jean argued. "That's what most murders come down to: money."

“Which means the bridge could be a factor,” I said. “If Jesse was going to reveal something about the bridge, that could cost someone a lot of money, not just in fines. It would destroy their business. And since I need to find out what Jesse was going to tell me the night he was killed, I’m going to make one more attempt to talk to him.”

It looked like I was going to have to eat my second burger of the day.

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Chapter Ten

I needed to replicate the dinner Jesse would have served me, so I took a couple of cans of soda from my fridge and gathered paper plates, plastic cutlery, and paper napkins. I filled a plastic dish with chips from a bag in my pantry, then stopped by a restaurant to get burgers that more closely approximated something that might have been grilled in someone's backyard than your typical fast-food burger would. I didn't know if I actually needed two burgers or if Jesse would conjure up ghost food, but I figured it would be easier to convince his ghost that he'd actually grilled burgers and we'd eaten dinner if there was a second burger on the table.

I also needed an excuse to be in the backyard, so I put an earring in my pocket. I figured I could always claim I'd come to look for something I'd dropped on Monday night. That wouldn't explain the hamburgers but, with any luck, no one would notice me and I wouldn't need to use the ruse. I parked in Jesse's driveway and found that the gate into the yard was still unlocked. There was no crime scene tape anywhere, so I might have been trespassing, but I wasn't violating a crime scene. I didn't see Jesse, so I hurried to set out the burgers on paper plates, arranged the drinks and cutlery, and poured chips onto both plates. I took a seat at the dining table on the porch and began eating, hoping Jesse would show.

When his ghost emerged from the house and headed toward the grill, I called out, "Hey, Jesse, have a seat and join me. You don't have

to keep fussing around with the food. I'm good. This burger is amazing. You do good work." I kept my voice low so the nosy neighbor wouldn't hear me. Her dog wasn't barking, and I hoped that meant she was inside. The night was a bit chilly, so it wasn't good weather for sitting around outside unless there was a fire pit.

He paused, and his image wavered. For a moment, I feared he'd disappear, but he solidified again. "Oh, yeah, sorry. I'm not used to having just one guest." He came over and took the seat opposite me.

I had to fight the urge to celebrate with a fist pump. It seemed to have worked. I didn't even try to bring up business while we ate—well, while I ate. He raised a ghost of a burger to his mouth. I couldn't tell if he realized that the real burger still sat uneaten on the plate. "How's Steve doing?" I asked. If he'd reset so many times the night before, he might not realize he'd told me about the rift with his son.

"Busy," he said. "His team made the playoffs. Statistically, a lot of playoff games come down to the kicker. The teams are pretty evenly matched, so an extra point or field goal can make all the difference. Steve spends a lot of time practicing and stretching so he doesn't get injured."

"I understand he's a really accurate kicker."

"One of the best in the state. He's getting scholarship offers from some of the big schools."

"You must be very proud."

"Oh, yeah. I just hope he still has time for his Pops when he's rich and famous." He grinned when he said it, but there was sadness in his eyes. "He's mad at me right now."

"Oh no, what's wrong?"

"He needs money for something, but I won't just give it to him without talking about why he needs it. I cover all his necessities, and

then some, so if he needs money I want to know why. He swears he's not gambling on sports. I told him I'll know soon enough if he's still getting speeding tickets because the insurance will go up. I told him if he got one more, I'd take the car away from him. My name is still on the title. It doesn't get transferred until he goes to college."

And there I figured I had the reason Steve needed money but didn't want to tell his dad. He didn't want to lose his car. But was that a big enough reason to kill his father? With his father's death, he lost a lot more than a couple of hundred dollars and use of his car. He'd lose a companion and supporter. He might lose the house. It had to be bigger than a speeding ticket for Steve to be the killer.

I finished my burger. "That was great, thanks," I said, as though he'd grilled it for me. It was a good burger. I'd have to go back to that hole-in-the-wall joint more often. "Now, we were going to talk about that bridge. You know something about the collapse?"

"That project was in trouble almost from the start, and I tried to warn people then. My old boss was in cahoots with one of the contractors. I think they altered the plans and specs after they were approved to allow cheaper materials and less rigorous construction. The altered plans were what were used to allow the bridge to pass inspection after it was built, since it matched the specs. I tried telling people all along, but my boss had connections in county government. At one point, he tried making it look like the plans were what I'd supervised, but I'd kept copies of the originals. They were able to hush it up, and my old boss was allowed to leave quietly. But they blamed the messenger, and that kept me from being promoted to my boss's position. That's when they hired Tom, who was more of the same. I can show you the original plans. The bridge that was designed wouldn't have collapsed. I keep a copy at home in the safe in my bedroom."

"Did Tom have anything to do with it?"

“The bridge was built before he joined the department, but he is friendly with the same people in the government that allowed it to happen in the first place. That’s why I didn’t want to talk to you in the office. I honestly don’t know who in the county government I can trust anymore. I definitely didn’t want anyone to see a reporter coming to the office to interview me.”

“Was the contractor ACR Construction?”

“Yeah, good old Ralph,” he said, shaking his head. “They’ve always cut corners, but they usually shaved them, just barely missing the specs. That can still save hundreds of thousands of dollars on a big project, and it doesn’t make that much difference. It just means the road needs to be resurfaced sooner, which makes them even more money. But when you do that on a bridge that size, it can be a big safety issue. You can’t fix a bridge going bad with another layer of asphalt, and I think they more than shaved the corners this time.”

That pretty much gave me everything I needed to know to be able to investigate the bridge, but there was also the issue of Jesse’s murder. “Were you killed because you were talking to me about the bridge?” I asked, then held my breath as I waited for his response. Not all ghosts knew they were dead, and they could react badly to the news.

“Killed?” he asked, frowning. He glanced down at his body, examining his hands, and noticed the uneaten hamburger sitting in front of him. He tried picking it up, but nothing happened. “I’m dead?” he asked.

“Yes, Monday night, before you could talk to me.”

“But I am talking to you. I grilled burgers, and then I told you what you wanted to know. If I’m dead, how are you talking to me?”

“Trust me, I often wonder that. I seem to have a weird ability that allows me to see and hear ghosts. I can have a conversation with you

the same way I would with any living person. When I saw you show up in the yard the night you were killed, I figured you had some kind of unfinished business, so I came back to talk to you.”

“But if I’m dead, then how did I grill burgers?”

I winced, caught in my deception. “Well, the first time I came to try to talk to you, you seemed to be stuck repeating the things you were doing right before you died, over and over.” I explained my plan, concluding, “It seems to have worked.”

“So, I’m dead. How?”

“I was hoping you could tell me. You were murdered, but they tried to make it look like a suicide. You were in the bathtub with your wrists slit, but you drowned rather than bleeding to death, even though your head was above water when they found you. And the house was completely locked from the inside.”

He paused for a moment, his gaze distant, and then he said, “I went in to get the burgers, then decided to go to the bathroom before that, and I wanted to tidy that room a bit before guests got there, and that’s the last thing I remember. Everything went black, and then I was here. But how did the killer lock the house from the inside? Oh no, not Steve. He wouldn’t, no matter how mad he was at me.”

It was eerie how quickly his mind had gone to the same thing mine had. “Or someone else with that talent,” I said, grasping at straws. “Did he get it from you?”

“No, I’m not actually from Stirling Mills. That came through his mother, whose family was with the sideshow people. But surely Alicia didn’t do it. She didn’t have anything to gain, and she doesn’t believe in that stuff, so she didn’t know she could do it. Steve had to talk to me about it when he discovered what he could do, and it was his great-grandmother who cleared it all up.”

“Do you know of any relatives of hers who might have wanted to hurt you, like if they didn’t understand your divorce?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know too many of her relatives. She isn’t that close to her family. I don’t think she’d had a falling out with them. She just doesn’t really do people. We tended to have holidays with just the three of us, and she tried to skip big events like family reunions and weddings, so I didn’t meet a lot of her extended family. There could be distant cousins she didn’t even know about. It’s possible that one of them might work for the contractor.”

“Is there anyone else who might want to do you harm? Anyone at work? A neighbor?”

“That cranky old lady next door,” he said with a chuckle. “I hope she’s happy I’m gone. I tried to be nice, but she just wasn’t having it.”

“Is it possible she might have done it?”

He shook his head. “Nah. If she’d killed me, it would have been a gunshot through the fence or something else sudden and violent. I don’t think she’d have had the patience to wait to ambush me in my bathroom and then stage a suicide.”

“There wasn’t anyone who owed you money, like for a football bet?”

“I don’t bet on sports. It takes the fun out of it, makes it too intense.”

The mention of intensity with sports reminded me of his boss. “What about Tom? Would he have had any animosity toward you?”

“I can’t think of why. The bridge was built before he got there, so he wasn’t at any risk from that being exposed. I didn’t want to talk to you at the office because I didn’t want any of the higher-ups to see me talking to a reporter about anything. People would ask questions, and then they’d have known to start covering things up. I think I had more

reason to kill Tom than the other way around, since he got the promotion I wanted, but I didn't actually hold it against him. It's not like it was his fault. The money would have been nice, but I'm not sure I'd have wanted the responsibility and the extra hours. I work to live, not the other way around. I'm okay with a job that lets me leave at five—or sooner if there's something going on—even if I don't make more money or have a lot of power.”

“Okay, that helps.”

“What happens to me now? What do I do? I don't see any light to walk toward, or anything like that.”

“I have no idea. I just talk to ghosts. I don't know how the afterlife works. I have seen someone move on toward a light after she got closure when her killer was caught and she was able to say goodbye. Maybe you still have something you need to do, or you could be tied to a person or place.”

“Steve. I think I'm still here for Steve. I at least want to see him in the playoffs. Can I leave my house?”

“I don't know. I've seen ghosts who stay around their graves, some who stay around where they died, some who stay at their homes. There may be some who are attached to people.”

“Maybe I'll find out when Steve comes over. He's bound to come over. He'll inherit the house. I wonder what they'll do with it.”

“Alicia isn't sure. Steve wants to keep it, but Alicia's worried she can't support two houses on one salary.”

“There's enough in the life insurance to pay it off and pay taxes for a few years, and then they can figure out what to do. It could be here for Steve when he finishes college, assuming he doesn't make the pros and earn so much money that he wouldn't want this dinky little place. I guess they haven't done all the legal stuff yet.”

“That takes time.”

“I’m glad you came by. I think it helped to be able to tell you about the bridge, and it’s good to know what happened to me. I wonder if you could come back with my family to tell them some things I want to say.”

“I think that would depend on whether or not they’d believe me about being able to talk to ghosts.”

“I don’t know about Alicia, but Steve knows he’s got an ability. He might be open to it. I could tell you something to say that only I would know, and then he’d believe you.”

I heard the roar of a muscle car engine nearby, and then it stopped. “I think you might have a chance to talk to Steve pretty soon,” I said. I had to hope he’d believe me, or I could be in trouble.

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Chapter Eleven

I jumped up, pulled the earring from my pocket and tossed it into the nearby lawn, then turned on the flashlight on my phone. By the time Steve flung open the gate and rushed into the backyard, I was doing a reasonable impression of searching. I hadn't seen where the earring had fallen, so I really did have to look for it.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" Steve demanded.

I turned toward him, "accidentally" shining the light in his eyes for a second, hoping to disorient him a little. "I think I lost an earring here the other night. I've looked everywhere else, so this must have been where I dropped it, and I didn't notice it in all the excitement. You haven't come across it, have you?" I was counting on the fact that an eighteen-year-old boy wouldn't have paid enough attention to an adult stranger on such a fraught night to have noticed that I wasn't wearing earrings then.

"No, I haven't seen it, but I haven't been here since that night."

"I'm sorry, I guess I should have called someone before I came out here, but I didn't want to bother anyone."

"You're that reporter lady, right? My mom said you wanted to talk to me."

"You don't have to if you don't want to. I just wanted to get a quote from you about your dad to put in the article about him. You can think about it and e-mail me something later tonight or in the morning, if

you prefer. I do need it before noon, though.”

“Could I just say something now?”

“Sure, if that’s what you want. Let me get my notebook.”

I was relieved that it seemed he’d bought my excuse and wasn’t going to call the cops, but when I reached the table where I’d left my purse, I realized that the burgers were going to be a dead giveaway that I was here for more than finding a lost earring. I couldn’t think of a good reason for the remnants of a hamburger dinner for two, one of them uneaten, to be on the table. Any explanation other than having a chat with a ghost would sound creepy, and chatting with the ghost wouldn’t sound much better.

“I thought we cleaned up the other night,” he said when he followed me to the table.

Well, there was that explanation.

“Hey, those aren’t our paper plates, and we don’t use that kind of bun.”

Or not.

“What’s going on here?” he asked with a frown. “Why were you eating dinner in my dad’s backyard? I’m calling the police.” He reached for his pocket to get his phone.

“I was here to talk to your dad’s ghost,” I said. Sounding weird was better than getting arrested.

“Seriously?” He poked violently at the face of his phone.

In desperation, I blurted, “Why haven’t you spoken to your dad in three weeks? What did you need money for that you couldn’t tell him about?”

He froze, his finger hovering above the phone screen. “How did you know about that?”

“Your dad told me. His ghost did.”

“You’re lying. Ghosts aren’t real.”

“And you don’t mentally nudge the football through the goalposts. You’re telekinetic. I can see and hear ghosts. It’s my thing. Your dad wanted to talk to me about a story, and I was giving him a chance to tell me what he wanted me to hear. He also wanted to talk about you.”

He put his phone away as he moved cautiously toward the table. “So, he’s here now?” His voice was soft and full of hope.

“Sitting at the place with the uneaten burger.”

“Can I talk to him?”

“He can hear you, but you won’t be able to hear him. I can tell you what he says.”

“I’m so sorry I left you like this, mijó,” Jesse said.

I relayed that, and Steve let out a soft sob. “I’m sorry, Pops. I should have told you, but I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

“You could never disappoint me.” I passed that on.

“I did something stupid. I raced someone and lost, and I got a speeding ticket and I lost the bet. You said you’d take the car away if I got another ticket, so I was going to try to pay for it myself, but I also had to pay off the bet.”

“You knew better than to race,” Jesse said, and I relayed it to Steve.

“It’s just that this guy was such a jerk. He had a brand-new car and he said mine was an old junker. I was going to prove him wrong. I would have, too, but the cops caught me. I thought that should have negated the bet, but he told everyone I wouldn’t pay up. I just wanted to shut him up and move on, you know?”

“Oh, Stevie,” Jesse said, shaking his head sadly. “I probably would have taken the car, but for a little while, not forever. You can’t let your

ego rule you like that. So what if he thinks his car is better? How does that affect you?"

When I'd told Steve that, trying to keep Jesse's words exact, Steve said, "But we built my car. It was like he was criticizing us."

"He was just being a jerk. You made him feel inadequate. That's why he challenged you. Next time, just laugh at him and go on."

"Let him think I'm not as good?"

"Why do you care what someone like that thinks about you? Would you ask that guy for advice? If not, he's not someone whose opinion should matter to you. You're going to have to remember that when you're playing college football. People in the stands and reporters are going to say things about you, and you've got to let it all go. Listen to your coaches and maybe your teammates, and no one else matters. Even if the kicker for the Cowboys tells you you're doing something wrong, you check with your coach before you listen to him."

It was hard to relay that whole speech and keep it in Jesse's words. I was better at taking notes while someone talked. It was more difficult to do it verbally on the fly. But I must have been doing a pretty good job because Steve seemed to have forgotten I was there. The conversation was purely between Steve and his father. "I'm gonna miss you so much, Pops," he sad, scrubbing a fist across his cheek to wipe away tears. "I'm gonna need you around to tell me that kind of stuff. You're gonna stay here, aren't you? I won't sell the house so you can stay here."

"I've got things set up so you shouldn't have to sell it. I want you to always have a place. But at some point, you may want to move on, and I don't know how this ghost thing works. I may need to move on to heaven, or whatever else is out there. I don't know if I'm tied to the house or if I can follow you around. Really, you'll never know if I'm

there or not if you don't have someone like Ms. Lincoln around to tell you what I'm saying. You can just tell yourself I'm always with you, if that makes you feel better, and you'll never know whether or not it's true. You will know that I want it to be true."

"I'm so sorry, Pops," Steve said again, his voice breaking. I couldn't help but wonder if that was guilt speaking. Was he sad merely because he'd missed the last three weeks of his father's life and the last time he'd spoken to his father was in anger, or was he sad because he'd killed his father to get the money he needed, only to find out that it wasn't worth it?

"It's okay, Stevie. I know you love me," Jesse said. "Now, you need to talk to the reporter lady about me, and I think it'll embarrass me to hear you saying such nice things about me, so I'm going to go for now." He started to fade, then solidified again. Turning to me, he said, "The combination to the safe is in a notebook in the upper drawer of the desk. It's labeled 'gym locker.'" Then he was gone.

"No, Pops, don't go!" Steve called out.

"He's already gone," I said.

"For good?"

"I don't know. He didn't go off through a glowing portal like the ghosts I've seen moving on, so he may still be around from time to time. I think he's still tied to you and wants to make sure you're okay, and he may need closure about why he was killed." I gestured for him to take a seat and resumed my own seat. "You're welcome to the burger, though it may be cold by now."

"Why do you even have the burger?"

"I came here with the police last night to see if I could talk to the ghost, but he was stuck in a loop of getting ready to grill, and he wouldn't talk business until after we'd eaten. I thought maybe if there

were burgers on the table, he could break out of the loop and think we'd eaten. It worked."

"You talk to ghosts a lot?" he asked, picking up the burger.

"Yeah. I kind of work for a ghost. The former editor of the newspaper, from a long time ago, still haunts the office and thinks she's in charge. And I run into other ghosts from time to time. Sometimes they help me with stories, like this one. Your dad made an appointment to talk with me about a bridge that collapsed. He was suspicious about how it was built. But he didn't get to do the interview."

"You think that's why someone killed him? I guess they didn't know about your power and that killing him wouldn't stop the interview, huh?"

His mood had shifted abruptly. There was now no sign of the tears and sobs he'd shown while talking to his father's ghost. I couldn't tell if it was the mercurial nature of teenage emotions or if his distress had been an act for his father's benefit.

"There's no way of knowing who's going to be a ghost and have something to say," I said. "But, yeah, it's unlikely anyone would have imagined that killing him couldn't keep him from talking. Killing someone usually silences them. Unfortunately, there's not much that can be done with testimony from a dead person. Sometimes it gives me ideas of where to look for more information, but the police have to be really careful with anything I tell them. They can't testify in court that the ghost of a murder victim told them something."

"Yeah, I can imagine. But did my dad have anything to say that might help?"

"I think so. He told me where to find the information we need. I'll tell the police, and I think it's something it would be reasonable to imagine they'd find in a search. So they may find his killer."

“Good,” he said, nodding with satisfaction.

I sipped at my can of soda, trying to think of something I could ask him that might indicate whether or not he could have killed his father, but I didn’t want to risk hampering Wes’s investigation by tipping him off that he could be a suspect. If he’d done it, he seemed to think no one would possibly suspect him. When he’d finished the burger, I said, “Have you thought of what you’d like to say about your father for the article?”

“Yeah. He wasn’t just my father. He was my best friend, and I’m going to miss him. He taught me a lot, and I was looking forward to learning so much more from him, but someone took that away from me. I have memories, but I’d rather have my dad.”

That was actually pretty eloquent. I wrote it down and read it back to him. “That’s perfect, just what I needed,” I said when he’d verified the quote. “Thanks so much, and sorry again for trespassing like this. I should have told someone I was coming, but it’s hard to explain this sort of thing.”

“I’m glad you were here. You gave me the chance to talk to Pops again and clear the air.”

I cleaned up the remains of the meal and put them in the bag I’d brought my supplies in, and we walked together toward the gate. He abruptly bent and picked something up. “Is this your earring?”

He handed it to me. “Yeah, it is, thanks. Your eyes must be better than mine.”

“So you really did lose an earring. Huh. I was sure that was a lie. They do that all the time on TV.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him I’d lost the earring the moment he pulled up in the driveway.

Just before he got in his car, he turned and said, “I don’t really

cheat at football with my power. At least, not that much. I'm pretty good even without it. My dad made me practice without using it. He said you never knew when I might lose that power or it wouldn't work, and I needed to be able to do it without any help. He said if you misuse a talent God gives you, you can lose it. If I go really wide—which doesn't happen often—I leave it alone. I only nudge it when it's close, like it's going to bounce off the upright, and even then it takes as much skill to know exactly when and how to affect the arc as it does to kick it. I don't even try to do it most of the time. It just sometimes seems that when I really want it to be good, it is. I'm not a cheater."

"Don't worry," I said, "I'm not going to expose you. I understand what it is to have a talent that sometimes gives you an advantage."

As I drove home, I pondered what to tell Wes about what I'd learned. He'd be mad at me for going on my own, but I wasn't sure either the ghost or Steve would have been so forthcoming with the police present. If Steve was still officially a suspect, Wes wouldn't have been able to use anything he overheard unless he made it an official interrogation. I'd been tempted to get Steve to let me in the house so I could get the plans out of the safe, but I figured it would be safer for the police to find them. It wasn't as though I'd be able to tell anything from looking at them, anyway. They'd only work as evidence if someone tried to pin the bridge collapse on Jesse by presenting fake plans.

I decided not to tell Wes anything, for now. The plans were safe and I didn't need them yet, and he'd learn what he needed to know about Steve in his own investigation. I needed to focus on the bridge.

Chapter Twelve

The next day, I was busy getting the newspaper to press, so I didn't have a spare moment to think about anything else. Once the presses were running, I went for my usual Thursday-night dinner at Margarita's restaurant. One downside of living over the newspaper offices was that the press was loud, and it was right under my living room. I always went out to dinner on Thursdays to escape the noise. It also worked as a reward for getting another issue done and it was an unofficial start to the weekend for me, since Fridays were usually slow.

I took my usual seat at the bar and soon after I arrived, Jordan Randall came in and took the seat next to me. "Mind if I join you?" he asked.

"Not at all," I replied, getting an idea. Jordan was a software billionaire who'd moved back to his hometown after cashing in his company. Now he was trying to boost Stirling Mills. He'd bought up a lot of the empty downtown buildings to restore them and set up small businesses and art studios, and he was a silent investor in many a local enterprise. If anyone knew anything about construction companies, it would be Jordan.

"Do you know anyone at ACR Construction?" I asked him after we'd completed the usual social niceties.

"Yeah, they're doing some of the infrastructure at my new place. It's far enough back from the road that I had to build a road, and there was a creek to cross, so there's a bridge, and now they're doing other roads

around the property so my sister will be able to drive her wheelchair around and get out in nature. Why?”

“I’ve been looking into that bridge that collapsed. They were one of the contractors involved in building it, and I have reason to believe there might have been some corners cut that led to the collapse.”

“I haven’t had any problems with them, but maybe my jobs are too small for them to make much money from cutting corners, and it would be too obvious if the quality was lacking. Plus, it’s just me they’re dealing with, and they know I have the resources to sue them into oblivion if they cheat me. There’s no one getting kickbacks, like there often is when they’re dealing with the government.” He shook his head sadly. “I hate to think that any of the people I’ve dealt with would have been involved in something like that, but I also hate the idea of a fairly new bridge collapsing during a thunderstorm. That’s going to hamper transportation around here for a long time. You don’t just build a new bridge overnight.”

“I doubt I’ll get anything out of calling them, but do you think you could let me come out while they’re working on your place?”

He grinned. “Ooh, a sting. I like it. Actually, one of the supervisors is supposed to be coming out to go over the next phase in the project tomorrow. You might happen to be there. I haven’t had you out to see the place, have I?”

“No, I’ve just driven by. I thought someone was building a resort hotel in an unlikely place when I first came to town.”

“That’s not too far off-base,” he said with a laugh. “It is kind of a resort, but for me and my family. The house is just about done. I was hoping to have Thanksgiving there, but that might be pushing it. Definitely Christmas, though. I want to have a big New Year’s Eve party. I’ve got enough rooms to have it be a weekend house party.”

“You know, someone always gets murdered at those.”

“In British mystery novels.”

“Or a couple of weeks ago at the last weekend house party we went to.”

“I’ll have the place thoroughly searched for escaped prisoners, I promise.”

“If I’m invited, that’s just about a guarantee that something will happen.”

“Of course you’re invited. And you’re invited to come over tomorrow. They’re supposed to be there at eleven, so come over around ten-thirty so we can be in the middle of a tour when the contractor shows up. Ralph is usually pretty punctual.”

“It’s not going to ruin your project if me being there makes him mad, is it? I’d hate to delay you being able to move in or your sister having access to the grounds.”

“If they’ve got a guilty enough conscience to get mad about you being there, I’d rather find out now and not do any additional business with them. I’m already considering hiring an independent inspector to make sure they didn’t cut any corners with me.”

“Thanks for your help with this. I’ll see you in the morning. Do I need to bring a hard hat?”

“No, that part of construction is all done. They’re just putting the finishing touches on the interior, like lighting fixtures, switch plates, and the like.”

But I wondered if I’d need the hard hat, and maybe some body armor, for dealing with the contractor.

SINCE THE WEEK’S newspaper was delivered on Friday and I had nearly

a full week before the next issue had to be printed, Fridays were my “easy” days, a good time to be out of the office—especially since that was when we got most of the reader feedback, mostly complaints about not enough coverage of the event or issue that interested them, and Charlene was much better at dealing with those calls than I was. They knew better than to be too rude to her. The gloves came off when they talked to me.

I’d been curious about Jordan’s estate ever since the first time I came to town for a job interview. I’d wondered why someone was building a hotel in the middle of nowhere, in a not particularly scenic location outside a tiny town. There had been a lot of progress since then, I noted as I drove from the highway to the house down what was essentially a private street. The building was complete from the outside. Some of the landscaping was even in place, with trees planted and sod laid.

There was a large parking area between a garage with four bays that was part of the main house and another detached garage with four more bays. I was trying to decide if I should knock on the front door or go around to the back when Jordan came out to greet me. He probably had cameras and sensors at the front gate to alert him of any arrivals before anyone could even get to the door.

“Hey, good morning, Lexie. Thanks for coming out,” he said, as though he wasn’t the one doing me a favor. “What do you think so far? Of course, most of the landscaping will have to wait for spring. I’m just laying sod to cover bare dirt for now, but I’m also seeding some native grasses that will be water-efficient. The house is as green as I could get it, with good insulation, deep eaves, and a geothermal heating and cooling system. There are solar panels on the roof, and the plan is to put up at least one wind turbine. I’d like to be as independent from the grid as possible. You’ve seen how unreliable it can be out in the

country.”

When he brought me inside, I was a bit surprised by how simple and homey the mansion was. Most mansions I’d seen tried to imitate a French chateau, with ornate decoration and gilding, but this looked like a fairly normal modern house, just a bit larger. I noticed that everything was accessible, with wide doorways, low light switches, and the kind of doorknobs that were levers instead of round knobs. Jordan’s sister had been injured in a car accident and now used a wheelchair. Jordan was building this house largely for her comfort.

It wasn’t the hotel I’d thought it was, but all it would take to turn it into a hotel was a check-in desk in the spacious foyer. There was an indoor pool and spa, a small gym, and a therapy room with massage tables. On the terrace in back was an outdoor pool and spa. I lost count of how many bedrooms there were. An elevator went to the upper floors. “This is amazing,” I told Jordan. “And if the stock market crashes and you need the money, you could just turn it into a hotel or a nursing home.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not in any danger. My holdings are pretty diversified. But the plan is to turn it into a nursing home if I ever don’t need it as a house anymore. It’s already fully accessible. I’ve considered creating a facility for younger people who need some assistance and might not be able to live alone but who’d rather live with people their own age instead of in a traditional nursing home. Now, let me show you out back.”

We went around the empty outdoor pool, which was on a paved terrace that was partially shaded by a canopy. There was an outdoor kitchen Jesse would have loved. A wide bare dirt path led from the terrace, curving around a slight hill toward a small wooded area. “The plan is to have a paved path down to the woods,” Jordan said. “There’s a little creek running through there, and I’m building a bridge over the

creek. Lisa likes being outdoors. She used to be an avid hiker, and I want to make it possible for her to go out in the woods whenever she wants.”

“I’m sure she’ll love it,” I said.

“This part is going to be a surprise for her, so don’t spill the beans.”

“No worries,” I said. It really wasn’t an issue, since I’d never met Lisa. I got the impression she’d been shy even before the accident.

“Ruthie’s been helping me test everything and make sure it’ll work.” Ruthie was a military veteran and double amputee who now worked as an artist and had a studio across the street from the newspaper office. She and Jordan seemed close, but I couldn’t tell if their relationship was romantic or if they were merely friends. If she was helping him design his house, that might explain their closeness. “Now, want to see the woods?”

“Sure,” I said. He walked me down the dirt path where the paved trail would go.

“Have you talked to Wes since that weekend?” he asked, perhaps a bit too casually for it actually to be casual. A lot of uncomfortable truths had come out during that weekend house party when we were trapped in a hotel with ghosts and a murderer. He and Wes had been friends in school, then had a falling-out, and Wes had finally told him why. There had been apologies, and they seemed to have come to an understanding, but I didn’t know where things stood beyond that.

“Yeah, but mostly about work,” I said.

“Oh. Okay. I was wondering because I haven’t seen him or heard from him, and I didn’t know if I should be the one to make the first move. I don’t want to bother him, but I don’t want him to be waiting for me to say something.”

“You may have to give him some time, wait until you happen to

bump into each other and see what happens. He hasn't said anything to me, but we've mostly been talking about work stuff, like this bridge case and then there was that murder."

"Oh, yeah, Jesse Martinez. That was a real shame. Is it connected to the bridge incident? I know he worked for the county."

"I don't know yet. But you knew Jesse?"

"Everyone knew Jesse. I went to a few of his parties." He chuckled. "I made the mistake of offering to hire a caterer so he could relax and just enjoy the day. I figured I needed to pay him back in some way for his hospitality. That didn't go over well."

"I can imagine. It sounds like the parties were largely an excuse for him to grill and barbecue."

His phone buzzed, and he took it out of his belt caddy to check it. "Looks like the contractor is here."

"Should we head back to the house?"

"This is what he's coming to look at, so he'll find us out here."

It wasn't long before a heavy-set man in jeans and a windbreaker came down the path toward us. He didn't strike me as a man who did a lot of physical labor, but then I supposed the boss wouldn't. This guy probably mostly pushed paper and dealt with customers. And cut corners so he could pocket the difference, if Jesse was right about him.

"Ralph, thanks for coming," Jordan said, approaching him and greeting him with a handshake. "I'm hoping we can get this taken care of before Christmas."

"I'll have to check our schedules and see what the subcontractors can do," Ralph said. "But let's look at what you've got going on here."

I hadn't gone with Jordan when he stepped forward to greet Ralph. Now they came toward where I'd hung back, and Jordan said, "This is

my friend, Lexie Lincoln. I was just giving her a tour of the place.”

“You’re the newspaper editor, right?” Ralph said.

Even in a small town where everyone seemed to know everyone else and everyone knew everyone else’s business, I wasn’t often recognized as the newspaper editor. Only people I’d interviewed recognized me, and only those plus the ones who’d been mad at the paper and called to complain seemed to know my name. Therefore it took me aback when someone working for a company that wasn’t even based in Stirling Mills had any idea who I was. “Yes. You make me feel famous,” I said with a laugh. “It’s always nice to meet a reader. Are you from Stirling Mills?” If so, maybe he had a power that could have allowed him to commit the murder, or he might know someone who did.

“No, but you’ve developed quite a reputation for digging into things. You got that whole River Road development shut down. That lost us what could have been a huge contract.”

“And saved a lot of people who were being cheated out of their land,” I pointed out, trying to keep my cool. Whether or not this guy was responsible for building a shoddy bridge that had killed someone, I didn’t like him. “I think there may still be some development, but from people who are being paid what their property is worth and going into the deal knowing what’s going on.”

“But it’s not going to be as big, which means they won’t need roads, which cut us out of it.” He said it with a growl. I got the feeling he held me personally responsible for his company’s loss.

“Perhaps you should have a better idea of who you’re doing business with and how they do business,” I said with an overly bright smile. “That will save you a lot of trouble. Or did you know?”

“That’s not what I’m here to talk about,” he said, turning abruptly to Jordan. “Now, about that bridge. Where is it going to go?”

“Actually, I’m curious to know if you knew that developer wasn’t on the level,” Jordan said. “I do care about who I do business with.”

Ralph appeared to belatedly realize that suggesting in front of a customer that he was okay with cheating old people as long as he made money might not have been the best idea. He struck me as the kind of man who was used to getting what he wants and being able to bowl people over, but I doubted he handled too many personal projects for billionaires who had the power to throw a lot of money in his direction and who weren’t in the market for kickbacks or bribes. With someone like Jordan, he had to do quality work on time and be pleasant while doing so. “I didn’t know where the land was coming from,” he finally said. “All I knew was that they were going to need roads in a subdivision. And now they don’t, thanks to that news rag.”

Jordan maintained a pleasant smile, but there was steel in his voice when he said, “So, you’re good with people being cheated as long as you make money? And your takeaway from this situation was that it was bad for you that justice was done, so you’re mad at the person who exposed the scam? I’m reconsidering my choice of vendor for this project.”

If I’d expected it to finally sink in for Ralph that he was just digging the hole deeper and deeper, I’d have been disappointed. He didn’t backtrack or apologize. He merely snorted and said, “So, you cost me yet another job.”

“I didn’t cost you anything,” I said, angry now and letting myself show it. “Take some responsibility for your own actions. You’re the one who can’t read the room and keeps ignoring the warning signs from your customer. I guess you’re more used to dealing with county officials who are in on whatever you’re pulling. By the way, I was planning to call you about the bridge on County Road Forty-Seven. You were in the picture of the ribbon cutting. Do you have a comment about why that

bridge failed so quickly when the hundred-year-old bridge upstream is still standing?”

“I don’t have to tell you anything,” he said, turning and walking away.

“Sorry about that,” I said to Jordan. “I guess I messed up your project.”

“You did me a favor. I don’t want to take any risks with my sister’s life. I’m not sure I’d trust a bridge his company built, and I don’t want to deal with someone who’s that callous. I can find someone else to do the work, even if I have to fly them in from outside the area. The upstairs of the carriage house is an office and apartment, so I could even house them while they’re here.” He frowned. “Do you really think his company had something to do with the bridge failing?”

He didn’t know about my ability to speak to ghosts, and although he was from Stirling Mills, he tended to scoff at the idea that there was such a thing as supernatural abilities, so I couldn’t tell him what I knew and why. “It looks possible. Jesse Martinez had an appointment to talk to me about the bridge the night he was killed, and he raised some red flags while it was under construction, but someone at the county buried his concerns.”

“I know you’ll get them if they were in the wrong,” he said with a grin.

I thanked him for the tour and apologized again for complicating his project, then returned to my car and headed back to the office. I felt like Ralph had all but confirmed that there had been something shady going on, but had he killed Jesse to keep him quiet? I wished I’d thought to test him for telekinesis, but I’d been so angry that it hadn’t occurred to me at the time.

I was pondering how I might be able to check on that, considering

the odds were good that Ralph wouldn't take my call or go anywhere near me, when I glanced up at my rearview mirror and saw a truck approaching me quickly from behind, and it didn't look like it was going to slow or stop.

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Chapter Thirteen

The way people drive in this part of the world, especially when they're driving trucks and think they own the road, it was hard to tell if this was just an impatient truck driver or if he meant any actual menace. I still had about a mile to go before the road widened to four lanes and he could pass me—assuming he wanted to. I sped up, edging above the speed limit. For once in my life, I actually hoped a cop would show up while I was speeding. I figured that would make the guy back off quickly.

I tried to keep my eyes on the road ahead of me, but I couldn't resist the occasional glance in the mirror to see if he was still on my bumper. He was so close that he didn't show up in my side mirrors. My first suspicion was that it was probably Ralph, still blaming me for the consequences of his own behavior, but the person behind the wheel had entirely the wrong build. That didn't mean Ralph hadn't sent an underling to menace me, though.

I reached the spot where the road widened, and he didn't pull around me to pass, even though I slowed down. That made it likely that he was threatening me. I'd had this happen before—or I thought so at the time. I didn't know what he was trying to accomplish. This was only making me more sure I was on the right track about something, and it made me suspect that someone with that contractor had killed Jesse to silence him.

We were within the city limits, but we were still out in the country,

so there weren't a lot of people around. Was he going to try to run me off the road and then attack me, or perhaps make it look like a single-car accident? I fumbled for my phone, then remembered that I had to unlock it to use it. There was no way I could punch in the code one-handed while keeping my eyes on the road. There was a way to make the phone call 911 without unlocking it, but I couldn't remember exactly how to do it without looking at it. I regretted never having set up a virtual assistant.

There was something almost as good as 911, though, maybe even better. I'd made it work before, and I hoped I could do it again. Wes couldn't read my thoughts most of the time, but I could project thoughts so that he could hear them, and apparently I was able to do so loudly when I was in distress. Hoping he was on duty, in his car, and nearby, I put all my mental energy into sending a distress signal that should get his attention. After that, I thought hard about where I was and what was happening to me. He mostly picked up on verbalized thoughts, so I mentally shouted, "This is Lexie. I'm on Main Street heading into town, almost at the bridge, and there's a truck riding my bumper really aggressively. He didn't pull around when the road widened, so I don't think he's just being impatient. I think it's about the bridge."

I crossed the bridge and passed the Old Mill restaurant and city park. Now we were getting into the town proper where there was more traffic. I wondered what would happen when I got to a stoplight. Would he stop behind me, plow into me from behind, or get out and do something to me while I was stopped? I locked my doors, just in case.

"I've crossed the bridge," I reported in my head. "We'll hit traffic soon, and I don't know what will happen. I need help!"

I wanted to weep with relief when I heard the siren approaching. Even if it wasn't coming because of my mental distress call, the

presence of someone official would probably deter this guy. I hoped it wasn't just a fire truck or ambulance that would race past. Soon I saw flashing red and blue lights coming toward me down the road, and I shouted in triumph, "Yes! Thank you, Wes, and your freaky brain." I flashed my headlights rapidly a few times to signal the approaching police vehicle, in case it didn't have anything to do with my mental signal. I wasn't picky about who helped me or why. The truck quickly backed off. The police vehicle made a U-turn and got behind me, escorting me. I lost sight of the truck. It would have been nice if they could have caught that driver, but since I didn't know if anyone else might be out there, I was glad of the police escort.

When I reached the office, I started to pull in to a spot in front so I could get out of the car right away, but there was a truck with a cherry picker parked there as workmen hung lights for the upcoming Main Street holiday display. It was probably for the best. I shouldn't leave my car visible like that, even though they obviously would know where to find me. I drove around the corner and went to the back, where I had a garage. As soon as I'd parked and killed the engine, I fell forward, resting my forehead against the steering wheel. I'd never been so glad to get home. The close call caught up to me, and I began shaking. There was no telling what that guy would have done if the police hadn't shown up, and the fact that he'd turned and fled at the sight of the police was pretty good evidence that he'd been up to no good. I'd have probably been found dead in my car in a ditch, victim of a "one-car" accident. Or, worse, I'd have just gone missing, and decades later my skeleton would have been found under a layer of concrete or tar when they rebuilt a road. I shivered even more fiercely at that thought.

Someone tapped on my window, and I jumped and yelped, then recognized Wes, leaning down to peer at me. He gestured for me to unlock the door. I had to fumble at the lock before I managed it. He

yanked the door open. “Lex, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, just a bit shaky,” I said. “That felt like a close call. I was having visions of my bones being found under a road after I’d been a cold case for decades.” After a few tries, I got the seatbelt release to work and swung my legs around to get out of the car, where I found myself caught in a tight embrace. I was a little astonished by just how good that felt. I was a strong, independent woman, but that didn’t mean I didn’t sometimes need someone else to lean on, to make me feel safe. I allowed myself to relax into the hug, resting my cheek against his chest and wrapping my arms around him.

“You just can’t seem to stay out of trouble, can you?” he said. His tone was light, but from where my ear rested, I could hear that his heart was pounding almost as badly as mine was. “Who did you annoy this time?”

I pulled away from him, but remained within the circle of his arms. “Hey! Are you blaming the victim here?”

“No. I just know you. You must have hit close to home to make someone that mad. What have you been meddling in this time?”

“Meddling? *You* asked me to get involved.” I poked his chest with my finger.

“This is about the bridge, then?”

“Yeah. You might as well come in,” I said. “We need to talk, and I need a cup of tea.”

“I’ll need to get a statement from you, anyway.”

“Why? You didn’t catch him, so it’s not like you need evidence to indict him.”

“I figured you were safer with an escort, and I’m pretty sure I got the tag on the dash cam. But I want this documented in case they

harass you again.”

He released his hold on me, and part of me wanted to clutch him back against me, but I forced myself to turn away and lean into my car to get my purse and phone. After I'd closed the car and garage doors, he walked with me, his hand at my back, to the newspaper building. He tried to steer me toward the stairs up to my apartment, but I shook my head and headed toward the door to the press room. “It’s time for Charlene to go to lunch, so I need to relieve her. We can talk in there.”

We went through the empty press room into the office, where Charlene took one look at me, gasped, and said, “What happened to you? You look even whiter than normal.” To Wes, she added, “She didn’t find another body, did she?”

“She almost became one,” he said.

“It wasn’t that bad,” I insisted. “Just a scare.”

“Get her seated,” she ordered Wes, getting out of her chair and coming around her desk. “I’ll make a fresh pot of tea.” She filled the electric kettle at the water cooler and put it on to boil.

“What happened? Is it a good story?” Jean demanded as she appeared in front of my desk. I couldn’t help but groan. The last thing I wanted was to have to talk to my ghostly boss in front of Wes.

“You leave her alone,” Charlene ordered her. When Wes blinked in confusion and took a step backward, she clarified, “I’m talking to Jean. We don’t need a nosy, bossy ghost right now.”

“She’s here now?” he asked.

“It’s my newspaper,” Jean said, folding her arms across her chest. The wide shoulders of her 1940s-style jacket amplified the gesture.

“It’s not a story,” I told her. “At least, not yet. But it is a sign that I’m looking in the right places.”

“If you’re taking flak, you must be over the target,” she said, nodding.

Charlene swirled hot water into the teapot, poured it out, measured tea into a tea ball, and poured boiling water over it, then checked her watch to time it. I’d truly found a gem of an assistant editor, one who could not only write, proofread, and deal with the public but also manage Jean and make a proper pot of tea. I’d lived in England as a child as an air force brat, so I was quite particular about my tea.

“So, what happened?” Jean asked.

“Let her have some tea to settle her nerves first,” Charlene said. “Can’t you see she looks almost as bad as you do?”

“I don’t look bad.”

“You don’t look alive.”

Wes watched this exchange, which must have been one-sided to him, with a puzzled frown. “Jean’s getting impatient,” I told him.

Charlene checked her watch and pulled the tea ball out of the pot, then poured a cup for me and added a couple of packets of sugar, giving the cup a brisk stir before handing it to me. “I know you don’t usually drink it with sugar, but this is medicinal.”

I took a long sip, and I felt like the tea went all the way through my system, soothing my nerves and giving me energy. “This is perfect. Thank you. You can head to lunch, if you like.”

“There’s no rush if you need me,” she said.

“I need to get a statement,” Wes said.

“Oh, official business,” she said.

“I’ll catch you up when you get back,” I promised.

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said as she went to get her purse.

“And if she doesn’t, I’ll tell you everything,” Jean said.

I finished my cup of tea, and Wes took it from me, refilled it, and added more sugar. Charlene noted this and gave me a sly wink before she headed out.

Wes sat in the guest chair and got his notebook out of his pocket, which meant this truly would be official. Jean glared at him for taking the chair she considered hers, even though she didn't technically sit on anything. She could sit just as comfortably hovering in mid-air, but she liked to pretend to be alive, as long as that suited her purposes. She went to lean against Charlene's desk.

"Now, can you tell me what happened today?" Wes said.

I briefed Wes about the encounter with Ralph, describing the way he reacted to me when he showed up at Jordan's place and the way he'd talked to Jordan, as well as Jordan's response. I watched his reaction when I mentioned Jordan. He usually winced or cringed, like the very mention was painful for him. I wondered if them clearing the air would have made any difference. He did still wince, but it didn't look quite so much like he was in pain. It was more of a reflex, one I imagined it would take him some time to get past. "It can't have been a coincidence that after he got fired from a job because of me, I had someone trying to run me off the road, or whatever it was he was trying to do," I said. "I'm pretty sure that wasn't Ralph driving. It was someone else, but he must have plenty of employees who can do dirty work for him."

"He was probably only trying to scare you, make you feel threatened," Wes said.

"It worked!"

"And I wouldn't say that you lost him a job. It sounds like he did that, himself."

"Well, yeah, but I was talking about the way he seems to see it. He

knew exactly who I was when I showed up, so it sounds like he's held a grudge for a while, and today didn't help. But I don't know if it has anything to do with the bridge. Was he just mad at me because I lost him the work in the development that got canceled, or is he worried about something else? Jesse thought he was crooked." Too late, I realized I'd let that slip. I hadn't been planning to tell Wes about that yet.

"What about Jesse?" he asked.

"You might want to close your notebook for this one because it's not going to make sense to anyone who doesn't know me really well."

I was surprised when he actually did close the notebook and slide it back into his pocket. "Okay, tell me unofficially."

"I went back to Jesse's place last night. I had an idea about how I could break his loop, and it worked. He told me what he'd been planning to tell me before he was killed. He was concerned that ACR was cutting corners, but his boss was apparently in on it—not his current boss, his former one—and they ended up changing the specs and plans to match what they built. He hid a copy of the original plans in a safe in his house so he could show that his plans were different in case they tried to pin any problems on him. The combination is written in a notebook in his desk drawer, under 'gym locker.'"

"When were you planning to tell me this?"

"When I learned more about the construction company. I figured I could give you a more complete report after I talked to Ralph this morning." I shuddered. "I just didn't count on getting such a strong response. If he was willing to send someone to menace me like that, it's not out of the realm of possibility that he'd be willing to kill Jesse to silence him."

"Though we still have the problem of the locked room and house.

How did he do it? The only suspect we know has telekinetic ability is Steve, and I don't think any of the others are even from Stirling Mills, so the odds are that they don't have powers."

"Unless their parents or grandparents moved away. It would be so much easier if we had good family trees to work with. Do you still suspect Steve?"

"I know he's hiding something. He didn't think about killing his father, but he was trying hard not to think about something."

"On the other hand, would a person who didn't have a guilty conscience actually be thinking about how they didn't kill him?" I asked.

"Sometimes, yeah. When people are brought in for questioning about something they didn't do, they tend to think about how this is a waste of time because they didn't do it." I considered that and remembered the time I'd been a murder suspect. I was pretty sure I'd been thinking about not having done it while I was at the police station, so I had to give him that much. "It's the guilty ones whose thoughts are a real jumble. Some actually do think things like, 'Hah, they'll never be able to blame it on me,' like something out of an old movie. Others try really hard not to think about it at all."

"Those would be the ones who know about your gift, right?"

"Not necessarily. Most people don't know about my gift. But if you're thinking about something, you're more likely to slip and say something, and if you've got a guilty conscience, you worry that anything you say or do will give it away. Anyway, none of this is real evidence that will hold up in court. It only helps me narrow down a suspect list. As for Steve, he needed money and he inherited everything."

"Alicia said he doesn't want to sell his dad's house. I would think

that if Steve killed his father to get money, he'd want to sell the house to get the cash and to never have to be around the scene of the crime again."

"If he's enough of a sociopath that he was capable of planning an elaborate murder staged to look like a suicide that required him to lie in wait and ambush his father, being around the scene of the crime would be more of a thrill. His alibi leaves a gap around the time of the murder. He should have been at football practice, but the coach said he let them out early that day to celebrate making the playoffs. A couple of people have said he needed money. It doesn't look good even without his talent. With it, it's bad."

"He needed money because he lost a street race. There was a bet, plus he got a ticket and has to pay a fine. He didn't want to tell his dad because his dad said he'd take away the car if he got another ticket."

Wes shook his head sadly. "And because of that, he didn't speak to his dad for the last few weeks of his life. But how do you know all this?"

"He showed up while I was talking to his dad. I was able to translate between them, so they worked a lot of stuff out."

"And I guess that was good enough to keep him from accusing you of trespassing," he said with a wry smile. "Do *you* think he killed his father?"

I sighed. "I don't want to think it. He had strong regrets, but he didn't say anything about it while talking to his father—though I guess he wouldn't with me there. I agree that he had the motive, means, and opportunity. Who else could have done it? Jesse said the gift was from Alicia's side of the family. Maybe there are some distant cousins out there, and there's always the chance of an unofficial relationship that's not in any records or acknowledged by the family." I'd already run into

that once, someone who supposedly had no sideshow connections having powers, thanks to an extramarital affair a couple of generations back.

He took his notebook out of his pocket and opened it again. “Is there anything you can tell me about the man who threatened you?”

“White, thin build. I didn’t get a good enough look to tell much else. The truck was white and it seemed huge, but that might just have been my perception under the circumstances.” I shrugged. “I was mostly keeping my eyes on the road and trying to call for help. That didn’t leave a lot of bandwidth for studying the image in my mirror for telling details. I’m not even sure I could pick the guy out of a lineup, and he was too close for me to get a good look at the truck.”

“Is there any chance he hit your rear bumper?”

“Not that I noticed. I never felt anything.”

He snapped his notebook shut. “There’s not much to go on, but I’ll have this on record to help establish a pattern, in case something else happens.” He frowned and added, “I know I was the one who asked you to investigate the bridge, but it’s not worth getting killed over, so maybe you should back off.”

“Don’t do it!” Jean urged. “Not when you know you’ve made them mad.”

Not hearing her, Wes went on, saying, “We’ll get the plans out of Jesse’s house, and that may be evidence relating to his murder, which puts it in my jurisdiction, and we’ll have them in case something else comes up with the bridge.”

“Be careful with the county officials,” I warned. “Jesse thinks someone high up in the county may have been involved. He thinks he didn’t get promoted because of the questions he raised when the bridge was being built. Anything you hand over to them might conveniently

vanish, especially if someone involved with the bridge tried to stage a suicide to make Jesse look guilty. By the way, how did Tom react to the news that Jesse was murdered?”

“The murder is my case, remember?”

“So, nothing I can put in the paper?”

“We’ve got until next Thursday before you need something to print. I’m not going to comment until then.”

He pocketed his notebook and stood. “Are you okay now? Should I stick around until Charlene gets back?”

“I’m not alone, remember?”

“I’m not sure how much help Jean will be if that construction company sends more goons after you.”

“Hey!” Jean protested. “I’ve helped before.”

“Jean says she’s been helpful in the past. And she has been. But I think I’ll be okay. Surely they wouldn’t come attack me in the middle of downtown. I think they made their point. Maybe I’ll pretend I’ve been scared away.”

Not that I was. I was more determined than ever to expose the corruption that had led to the bridge collapse, and if Jesse was killed because he was going to talk to me, I felt I owed him justice.

Chapter Fourteen

Since so many incidents I'd encountered in my time in Stirling Mills were only possible because of the uncanny abilities some of the people had, I'd begun keeping track of the abilities. I understood that a lot of the town's inhabitants would be uncomfortable with a registry of powers because there was still some suspicion about them among certain groups of long-time locals, but it made my work easier to have a better idea of what I was dealing with. I'd already made a list of the original sideshow participants, based on articles about the show in the newspaper's archives and on exhibits in the town's tiny museum dedicated to the show. Supernatural abilities were only teased in the show's promotional materials, so it was difficult to tell exactly what powers they might have had and, as Jean had said, it might have been behind-the-scenes people who had the powers.

Something like the strong man was pretty obvious. He—and his descendants—had super strength. I absently rubbed my neck as I remembered what it had felt like when one of those attacked me. There was also a person who could channel and manipulate electricity. Other powers helped in the act without being showcased. The “hypnotist” actually had an ability to influence and manipulate others. I'd also found a person whose power was the ability to go unnoticed, and she was descended from a magician's assistant, who'd been able to manipulate things on the stage without the audience paying any attention to her.

Based on Jean's suggestion, I looked at the knife thrower, got his name, then went to the archives to see if there was any mention of marriages. Of course, this assumed that the knife thrower was the one with telekinesis. It could have been his lovely assistant who nudged the knives toward their target while she stood there, smiling. The lovely assistant wasn't mentioned in the newspaper. If it was a carny, like Jean had also suggested, finding any information would be impossible.

I was sitting at my desk, flipping through bound volumes of newspapers, when Charlene returned from lunch. She bore a foil-covered plate that brought with it a hint of smoky barbecue aroma. "You doing any better?" she asked.

"Yes. It was just a bit of a scare, but I'm fine now."

She held up the plate. "I'll trade you smoked turkey with a spice rub for a story."

It occurred to me then that I had neither eaten lunch nor made plans for lunch. I placed a slip of paper in the newspaper archive to mark my place, closed the volume, and shoved it aside. "It's not that exciting. I happened to be at Jordan's place when a contractor showed up to discuss a project, and it happened to be the contractor behind the bridge that collapsed."

"That's awfully convenient," she said dryly.

"He was already mad at me for getting that subdivision canceled when I found that people were being manipulated and cheated out of their land. Jordan didn't take well to the way he talked about that and fired him from the planned job, the contractor blamed me, and as I drove back, a guy in a big pickup rode my bumper in a pretty menacing way until Wes showed up. That's it."

She raised an eyebrow. "Hmmm," she said, as though she was weighing whether that story was worthy of her offering, but she came

over and placed the plate on my desk. “That does sound suspicious. On the other hand, there are plenty of guys who drive like that around here, and they all seem to drive those oversized pickups.”

“Like they’re compensating for something,” I said.

“Exactly. But it is fishy that it happened to you right after you annoyed the contractor.”

“I didn’t really do anything to annoy him. He was already annoyed. I merely pointed out the fact that he was far more upset about losing the subdivision job than he was about people being cheated out of their land and homes.”

“Which he probably found annoying.”

“But it’s not my fault that he doubled down to the point he made his customer uncomfortable with the idea of continuing to work with him.”

“That kind of guy would definitely blame you for it. You’re lucky Wes showed up when he did.”

I didn’t know if she knew about Wes’s ability, so I just said, “Yeah. When I saw a police car approaching, I flashed my lights to get their attention, and it seems that the sight of a cop scared the guy off.”

“The question is, did this guy scare you off?”

“Not likely,” I said with a snort. I figured I’d more than held up my end of the bargain, so I peeled the foil off the plate, got my cutlery from my desk drawer, and took a bite of turkey. “Ohh,” I sighed in pleasure. “Tell Royce this is his best one yet.”

“The potato salad isn’t what we’ll serve with it at Thanksgiving. That’s just what he made today. He is experimenting with the green beans, though.”

She let me eat without asking more questions, instead filling me in on her husband’s latest culinary experiments. Since he’d retired and his

wife had returned to work, he'd been expanding his repertoire beyond things that could be made on a grill, and he was gradually taking over everything but the baking. "Which means I'll keep working until they put me in the ground," she said with a laugh. "I'm afraid if I were around the house more, he'd revert to his old ways, with me doing everything that's cooked indoors."

When I'd finished my lunch, she asked, "Do you think this contractor has something to do with poor Jesse's death?"

"I think it looks awfully suspicious. He'd already tried to blow the whistle on them when the bridge was being built, and his bosses hushed it up. Then he got killed before he could talk to me about it, and the shady contractor knew all about me. The trick will be making the connection in a way that gives us any proof. Do you know any people in town who are telekinetic? That might explain how the doors were all locked from the inside."

She frowned, considering. "Well, I've wondered about Steve, but surely you don't think he killed his dad."

"He's still a suspect, but I don't really think he did it. It seems to come from Alicia's family."

"That won't narrow it down much. She's from a big family with a history of big families, so there are dozens of cousins all over the region. We're lucky it seems that most of them are either honest or don't know what they're capable of because if you can lock a door from the outside like that, you can also unlock it, and I haven't heard of a lot of thefts or other crimes in which interior deadbolts were unlocked from outside. I know most of the sideshow people taught their kids not to abuse their powers, lest it ruin their acts, but as the generations die off, those lessons get lost, and there aren't any acts to ruin these days, so there's less reason not to use their abilities elsewhere."

I looked across the office at her, shuddering with the realization that the person who'd killed Jesse, who might want to silence me, wouldn't be deterred by any locked doors. Barricading myself in my apartment wouldn't do much good. I'd have to hope there was no way they could shut off the security alarm so that at least I'd have some warning that I was in danger.

But that assumed that the murder was related to the bridge, and I still wasn't sure about that, as likely as it seemed. If my potential would-be assailant had telekinetic powers, he could have done something to me without chasing me down the road. He could have sent rocks through my windshield, made me veer off the road, maybe turned my key in the ignition so that my engine died. It all depended on what he was capable of and what he wanted to achieve. The killer had the finesse to turn a deadbolt from outside, but how much mass could he move, and from how far away? And maybe the guy who'd chased me had only wanted to scare me and to make sure I knew that he wanted to scare me. A rock seemingly accidentally hitting my windshield wouldn't have had the same effect, and since I was a newcomer to the town, they wouldn't have assumed I knew about the town's secrets. Using telekinesis to threaten me wouldn't be much of a threat if I didn't know it was possible.

I shoved the bound volume of old newspapers aside with a groan of frustration. "There's no way I'll be able to track down all the people who potentially have that ability." But I could try talking to the person who was possibly the link.

I had the thinnest of excuses to call Alicia. It was only polite to ask her what she'd thought of the article and obituary and to offer her some extra copies if she wanted them for family members. I found the contact information she'd left with the obituary and called the phone number, hoping she was still off work. She did want the extra copies,

and I offered to drop them off that afternoon. “Before two, please,” she said. “I’m going to the pep rally and seeing the team off for the game.”

It only then struck me that it was Friday and the team was in the playoffs, with the stadium farther away than for the typical away game. The town would be even more deserted that night. I knew my sports freelancers had the game under control, but I wondered if I should attend the rally. I agreed to head over to Alicia’s house soon, then checked in with my freelancers to see who was covering what. The photographer was already planning to attend the pep rally and send-off, but I didn’t have a reporter going since the sports reporter was heading to the game early, so I’d have to cover it myself.

This case—or cases—had distracted me so much that I’d managed to let the biggest news story of the week slip my mind. I thought the murder was more important, but I doubted the majority of the town did. It had happened Monday, so it was old news. This was the playoffs.

I told Charlene she could leave whenever she wanted, since it was unlikely that anyone would be calling the newspaper while they were preparing for the big game, then got a few copies of the newspaper and headed over to Alicia’s house. She lived just around the corner from Jesse, in a house that was remarkably similar. When she came to the door, she was already dressed for the rally and game in a Stirling Mills football jersey with what I assumed was Steve’s number on it. “Thank you so much for bringing these over,” she said.

“It also has the articles about the playoffs and Steve’s role in the last game,” I said. “It sounds like he’s quite the kicker.”

“Yes. His father hoped it would get him a scholarship.”

“How’s he holding up? I imagine that’s a lot of pressure, considering everything else.”

She sighed. “Do you know that they see him as a potential suspect?

Apparently his alibi leaves a gap around the time of death, and then there's the fact that he needed money and he inherits everything. But I don't see how he could have locked all the doors from the inside and still left the house."

Did she not know about the ability he inherited from her family? I wasn't sure how to bring it up. "Well, this is Stirling Mills," I said with a slight chuckle. "Stranger things have happened here."

"Oh, you've heard about that? Don't believe it. It's all just stories. My grandmother used to talk about her mother being part of the sideshow, something about being the knife-thrower's assistant, and one of her cousins ran a game that he was supposedly able to rig with his mind, but if they had some sort of power, I'd have thought they wouldn't have been so poor that they got stuck in a town like this. Yeah, people have joked about how accurate Steve is and how that must mean he got the family power, but that doesn't mean he can turn bolts with his mind or that he would have killed his father for the money."

It sounded like she was a dead end. Since she was denying the power, I couldn't very well ask her for the names of all her extended family members. "I imagine your family will be there tonight to cheer Steve on."

"My parents will be, and one of my brothers is still in town. A lot of our relatives got out of this town as soon as they could, so I don't have all the family ties here, like some people do. If there's a trait that runs in the family, it seems to be introversion. Everyone keeps to themselves. We aren't the family reunion type."

"That's kind of the way my family is. My dad was in the military, so we're all scattered, and I didn't grow up around relatives. I've only seen some of my cousins a few times in my whole life."

“I’ve found there’s both good and bad to that. Our immediate family was really close, but right now, I almost wouldn’t mind having a big family around to help out while I can’t deal with everything. I’m glad of the game tonight because I can use the distraction.”

“Speaking of which, I’d better let you go. I have to go cover the pep rally, myself.”

“Thanks again for the newspapers.”

I managed to hide my disappointment until she shut the door. There was no way I could track the talent through her family if they were scattered. But it did mean that it was possible there were people outside Stirling Mills who had the talent. Could she be related to Ralph or one of his minions without either one of them knowing it?

Chapter Fifteen

We hadn't had pep rallies at my high school, so it was a new experience for me. I couldn't quite tell what the point of it was. If it was to fire up the team, they all seemed distracted, like their minds were already at the game. Maybe it was to get the student body excited so they'd cheer more at the game. My cynical side figured it was to give the popular kids a little more time in the limelight. The football players were recognized individually—with a moment of silence in honor of Steve's father—the cheerleaders did a few dance routines and built pyramids, and the majorettes did a routine. There was surprisingly little actual cheering. The whole thing was noisy, with every sound reverberating through the gym, and the smell of sweaty socks that seemed to have permeated the gym wasn't helped by all those people crammed in there.

Of course, I wouldn't say that in the article I wrote. My status in the town wasn't yet that secure. I'd write about the fans being fired up as they gave the team a rousing send-off. At the end of the rally, the student body lined up to form a corridor from the gym to the team bus, and they cheered as the team trooped past them. Once the team had passed, the students fell in behind them and lined the driveway to cheer as the bus departed—though I noticed more than a few students sneaking to the parking lot to leave a little early. The game that night was at a stadium nearly two hours away, so some of them probably wanted a head start on the trip. Others may have merely wanted an

early weekend.

I felt reasonably safe while I was at the rally because I doubted Ralph would be so stupid as to menace me in that public a setting with police present, but as I drove home, I kept checking my mirrors, alert for any possible threat. I didn't breathe freely until I was safe inside my garage, but then I had to enter a building that felt emptier and more lonely than ever. Charlene was already gone—she had grandsons on the team and Royce was planning a tailgate party, so they were probably on their way to the game by that time—and Jean was being unusually quiet. I was tempted to call out for her so I wouldn't be alone, but I had to admit that Wes was right about her not being much help, and she tended to get testy about being summoned. She retaliated by showing up in my apartment.

I normally waited until late in the evening on Fridays to go to Margarita's restaurant. It was really crowded during the prime dinner hour, so I didn't have a chance to chat with Margarita, and there was less chance of Wes showing up then. Sometimes Margarita was able to get away early so that we could catch a late show at the old movie theater down the block, and me being there late made it easier for us to do that. But on this night, I welcomed the idea of being in a crowd. Not that I expected one. The game was far enough away that almost the entire town had already evacuated and headed toward the stadium. The downtown streets were even more deserted than they'd been the week before. Even the workers putting up the holiday lights were gone.

Feeling vulnerable, I darted across the street and entered the restaurant, which was nearly empty. "Oh, good, a customer!" Margarita said when I came in.

"I guess everyone's on their way to the game," I said.

"Yeah. A few people got takeout earlier in the evening, and the

senior early bird rush still happened. Otherwise, it's probably going to be quiet. Wouldn't you know, the night I could close early and take some time off is when there's nothing to do. The movie theater's closed, and there are no events planned in town. Want to head to Waco and see if we could find some fun?"

Under other circumstances, I'd have been up for that, but the thought of being on the road late at night made me shudder. Not only did I not want to take the risk after what had happened earlier that day, but I didn't want to drag her into my danger. "Or maybe we could do a movie night and stay in," I suggested.

"That could work, too." She frowned at me. "What's wrong? When I suggested heading to Waco you looked like I'd said we should go bungee jumping over the Grand Canyon."

Before answering, I glanced around the restaurant to see who might be listening. There were only a couple of tables occupied, booths on the other side of the room from the bar, where I sat. I said, "Something happened this morning that makes me a little reluctant to be on the road late at night." I leaned forward, lowered my voice, and gave her a quick recap of my investigation and what had happened.

"Wow!" she replied. "First, I need to make you a margarita and, second, I don't know that I want to be out on country roads with you late at night. Movie night it is. We may even have time for a double feature."

"Sounds like a plan," I said. I ordered dinner, keeping it fairly light since I knew we'd be snacking during the movies, and when she went back to the kitchen to turn in my order, she returned with a pitcher of margaritas.

We were discussing what movies we were in the mood for when Wes came in. His relief upon seeing the nearly empty restaurant was

visible. "I guess you're on call again tonight," Margarita said as he took the seat next to me.

"I volunteered." With a glance toward me, he added, "I'd rather keep an eye on things here in town."

"I haven't seen a sign of them the rest of the day," I assured him. "And you may notice that I'm here instead of sitting at home alone."

"Good. But be careful."

The door opened, and everyone turned to see who was still in town to come to the restaurant. It was Jordan. He smiled a greeting, but his smile became tense when he saw Wes. He started to head to sit on my other side, then steeled himself and went to take the seat by Wes. I was close enough to feel Wes tense up, but he didn't say anything. "Hey, Lexie, Margarita. Good to see you, Wes," Jordan said.

"Hey," Wes said. It wasn't exactly friendly, but it wasn't hostile, either, which was progress. "You're not at the game? I thought you were the biggest local booster." That could have been meant as a dig, but his tone was perfectly neutral.

If it was meant as bait, Jordan didn't bite. "Even I couldn't get tickets to this game," he said. "Not that I tried too hard. I sometimes enjoy the cultural ritual around a small-town football game. It's a nice slice of Americana, and I like watching the halftime show, but I can take or leave the game itself. I might have been able to meet someone's price to buy a ticket, but I figured I'd let people who care about it or who are connected to it go. I don't really have any ties to the team now. I donated the charter bus so the team didn't have to ride in school buses, so I've done my part."

"Oh, the long trips in school buses," Wes said, shaking his head. "I sure don't miss those days, especially when we had to spend hours bouncing around on those country roads late at night on the way back

from the game.”

Jordan was stunned momentarily speechless. That may have been the first time in more than a decade that Wes had actually willingly participated in a conversation with him. Jordan blinked a few times, then said, “I figured it would be even worse after they’d spent the evening being hit and knocked over. Just imagine being sore and bruised and then bouncing around in a school bus.”

“I’m sure the team appreciates it,” Margarita said. “And I appreciate you coming here so I don’t feel like I’m wasting my time being open. What can I get for you?”

After he and Wes had ordered, Jordan turned to me and said, “Lexie, you really hit a nerve with Ralph this morning.”

“You have no idea,” I said, then told him about what had happened afterward. “I can’t prove it had anything to do with him, but I thought it was awfully suspicious.”

“Now I’m even more glad not to be working with him anymore. I don’t want him on my property if that’s his attitude toward business.”

“I hope that doesn’t delay your project, though,” I said. “I wouldn’t want Lisa not to get her trail and bridge.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already lined up someone else. They’re starting work next week.”

“Did you get any results on the license plate?” I asked Wes.

He shook his head. “Unfortunately, I didn’t get a good shot on the dash cam. He was too close to your bumper.” Turning to Jordan, he said, “You know something about building specs and blueprints, right?”

“I’m a software engineer, not a civil engineer, but after all the building and remodeling work I’ve been doing, I’ve learned a lot lately. Why?”

“I may need another set of eyes who could tell the difference between two sets of plans.”

“Do you have the ones that may have been altered?” I asked.

“Not yet. I have the ones Jesse had locked away, and I’ve heard the county is going to release preliminary findings about the bridge collapse on Monday. I bet that’s when they’ll show the altered ones. Jesse makes a convenient scapegoat.”

“Funny, I haven’t heard anything about it,” I said. “You’d think if they’re going public with their version of events, they’d invite the media. I know the head county engineer has my contact info and knows I’m working on a story about the bridge.”

“You probably got yourself removed from the guest list this morning,” Wes said. “You’d ask too many uncomfortable questions. But I’ll send you the info. If you show up, it would look even worse if they tried to bar you. That would make the other reporters in the county suspicious. I’ll be going as part of my investigation into the murder, since this makes for a strong motive.”

“If you think you can get me in, I’ll go, too,” Jordan said. “As a citizen who utilizes construction professionals, I want the info, but I can also tell you what’s wrong or different about the plans.”

“Can you work a camera?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m a pretty good photographer.”

“Then I’ll give you press credentials and bring you as my photographer.”

“They’ll know something’s up,” he warned.

“If I’m there, they’ll already know something’s up. Even more so if the Stirling Mills police show up.”

“I’ve reached the point when I want to make them nervous,” Wes

said.

“It sounds like you don’t suspect Steve anymore,” I said.

“I finally got an alibi for him that checks out. When they got out of practice early, he and some friends went for ice cream. There’s security video at the ice cream place of them during the approximate time of death, so he couldn’t have done it.” Shaking his head, he added, “You wouldn’t believe how much trouble it was getting a look at their footage. I’m not sure what they were hiding, so now I want to keep a closer eye on that place.”

I let out a long sigh of relief. “That’s good. I was so worried. I didn’t want it to be him.”

When the restaurant had emptied of other customers and we’d all finished our meals, Margarita said, “I’m not kicking you out, but I’d like to let my staff go for the night, and I’m planning to take the rest of the evening off.”

“No worries,” Jordan said, handing over a bill far too big to cover just his meal. “This is for all of us. Keep the change.”

I held my breath, waiting for Wes’s response. He usually refused the offer and would insist on paying rather than being beholden to Jordan, but this time, he merely said, “Thanks.” He didn’t smile while saying it, but it was a start.

“Yes, thanks,” I said.

“I figure I owe you for saving me from a bad contractor,” Jordan said.

“Do you think you could come by the station this weekend to look at those plans?” Wes asked Jordan.

“Sure. Just give me a call. Good night, everyone.”

When he was gone, Wes turned to me and said, “I really don’t want

you being alone tonight. Why don't you spend the night with me? I mean, at my house. In my spare room. I have a spare room. With a bed in it."

I froze, not sure how to answer. Part of me was thrilled at the idea of spending the night at his house. There would be a lot of opportunities for us to get closer, even if we slept in separate rooms. I had visions of us sitting across the table from each other at breakfast. At the same time, I knew Jean wouldn't approve at all. This was a small town, so people were sure to notice that I'd spent the night at his house, and they wouldn't know why or that I'd slept in the spare room. I hadn't been in this town long enough to have a reputation that would keep people from jumping to the worst possible conclusion, and I didn't want that to affect either my work or his. If we were going to get involved, I'd rather do so gradually than let it look like we'd already jumped in bed.

"We were planning a pajama party," Margarita said before I managed to answer. "We've got a double feature lined up, and I've got a spare room, too. We'll be close enough to keep an eye on Lexie's place. I think we can even hear the alarm from here. You're on call, anyway, so you may not be at home the whole time."

"Okay, that works," he said, nodding.

"I just have to run home to get my overnight things," I said, glad I hadn't had to be the one to make excuses.

"I'll go with you for that."

"Come around back when you come over," Margarita instructed.

Wes went with me across the street, then waited in my living room while I packed my pajamas and some clothes for the next day. I was getting my toiletry kit when Jean appeared. "And where do you think you're going for the night with that policeman?" she asked.

“To Margarita’s for a slumber party,” I replied, feeling like a teenager caught doing something naughty. I reminded myself that not only was she not my mother, but she’d been dead before I was born. “He’s just making sure I get there safely.”

“Very well, then,” she said, vanishing.

“Who were you talking to?” Wes asked when I returned to the living room.

“My resident ghost. She wanted to know where I was going.”

“Must be like living with your mother.”

“I think my mother would be a lot less old-fashioned.” I belatedly realized that I’d let on that the concern was about me spending the night with him, but then he’d also stammered about making sure I knew there was a spare room and a spare bed, so that awkwardness was already out there.

He made sure I locked all the doors and set the alarm before he escorted me back across the street and around to the back of the restaurant, where a set of stairs led to Margarita’s apartment over the restaurant. “Call me if anything happens. I mean anything,” he ordered when Margarita opened the door, and we assured him we would.

Margarita was already in her pajamas, pink ones covered in tiny pictures of tacos and margarita glasses. “Get into your pajamas while I make popcorn and cocoa,” she instructed once she’d shown me to the guest room.

When I came out wearing my blue pajamas with a snowflake print, I saw that she’d already set up her living room. There were fuzzy blankets and pillows on the sofa, and an assortment of snacks was laid out on the coffee table. We’d chosen a romantic comedy both of us had seen dozens of times, so it mostly served as background noise for snacking and chat. “So, what’s up with you and Wes?” she asked, soon

after the movie started. "You looked like a deer caught in the headlights when he suggested you stay with him. I thought things might be starting to happen between you after that night at the inn."

"So did I, but I'm not sure we're quite yet up to spending the night, and I'm not up for the gossip. Jean has reminded me that there could be a conflict of interest with the newspaper editor dating a prominent local cop. I think we need to take things slowly enough for the town to get used to the idea and for me to establish enough of a reputation that people can be sure I won't let it affect my work."

"That's wise," she said, nodding.

"Thanks for the save. I thought Wes was the mind reader."

"I was already going to suggest it. I agree that you shouldn't be alone until this has been resolved."

"With any luck, that will happen Monday. Either we'll expose them as frauds then, so there will be no reason for them to think menacing me will make any difference, or they'll think they're no longer at any risk from me once they have their side of the story out."

We settled in for movies, more margaritas, and snacks. Around midnight, both of us were weeping over the ending of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. "The cat!" I got out between sobs as I reached for a tissue.

"I know," she said, grabbing a tissue for herself.

"It gets me every time. And I've never even had a cat."

She nodded. "And they're out there in the rain."

The sound of a honking horn interrupted before I could say anything. The horn was followed by shouts. We rushed to the front windows that overlooked Main Street in time to see the flashing lights of the police escort, followed by the charter bus, a row of yellow school buses behind them, and a seemingly endless line of cars behind them.

Someone in one of the school buses shouted through an open window, “We’re going to state! Woo!”

“I take it they won,” I said.

“Must have,” Margarita agreed. “But state is still a long way off. They have to win a few more games first.”

We watched the line of cars go past. Many of them had messages supporting the team painted on the windows in shoe polish. A number had streamers flying from their antennas, and there were team flags clipped to windows. I wondered if they’d all been honking and shouting the whole way home, or if that was just for the benefit of the downtown area.

When the last car had passed, we returned to the couch. “I’m glad for the team, but it’s terrible for business,” Margarita said with a sigh. “Don’t tell anyone, but I kind of hope they lose the next game. Then I’ll get my customers back on my busiest night. It would be different if we hosted the games. Then I’d have a bigger crowd than I could handle. But playoffs are generally on neutral ground.”

“Aren’t we hosting a game for some smaller schools next week?” I asked. I’d seen it on a local calendar of events.

“Yeah. That may bring some people in, if they wait until they get here to eat and even know to come here, but my regulars will be out of town for our game.”

“You might be able to run some targeted online ads to hit the towns that will be playing here,” I suggested.

“Can we talk about that in the morning when we’re both completely awake and sober?” she asked, then yawned. “I don’t think I can manage another movie,” she added.

“Yeah, it’s definitely past pumpkin time for me,” I agreed. We tidied up from the movie so we wouldn’t have to face a mess in the morning. I

was tossing candy wrappers in the trash when I heard an alarm ring out.

“Is that yours?” Margarita asked.

“Sounds like it.” My heart racing, I rushed to the window and looked across the way to the newspaper office, where lights were flashing in the front window. “Yeah, it’s mine.”

I ran to the spare room to get my phone from my purse, and while I called Wes, I shoved my feet into my shoes. “My alarm just went off,” I said as soon as he answered. “Someone must be at the newspaper building.”

“On my way,” he said.

I was already heading down the stairs to see what was going on.

Chapter Sixteen

I wished Margarita had a staircase from her apartment to the restaurant, or maybe a fire pole, so that I didn't have to run around the block from her stairs to get to the newspaper office. I hated not being able to see what was happening. Oddly, it didn't occur to me that I might be in danger. I was too busy having visions of the old building being set on fire. It would be an enormous loss to the town and would destroy Jean's legacy. There was no telling what would happen to Jean if the building she was linked to was destroyed. I didn't smell smoke, which was encouraging.

I rounded the corner to the side street and raced to Main Street. The office came into view, and I didn't see anything that looked like flames. I also didn't see a person, which suggested that the alarm had been set off in back, either at the garage, the press room, or the rear entrance to my apartment.

Ruthie, the artist who had a studio and apartment across the street from the newspaper, came out of her studio, her service dog at her side. "I heard the alarm," she said. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," I said. "I was at Margarita's when I heard it." I glanced down and realized I was in my pajamas. I wasn't dressed any worse than a lot of people I saw at the grocery store on Saturday mornings, so I decided not to worry too much about it. I was fully covered. "I got a threat earlier today, so this may have something to do with that."

I heard sirens, but I didn't see any flashing red and blue lights approaching. The police must have been heading down the alley. A moment later, a white truck came tearing around the corner from the alley and down the side street. It made a wide, skidding turn on to Main Street, then came barreling toward Ruthie and me. I could jump out of the way, but she was a double amputee on prostheses and crutches, so she wasn't quite as agile.

I darted across the street, getting away from Ruthie. I hoped the truck would swerve to go after me so she'd have time to get to safety. I made it to the other side and moved to stand behind a lamppost, so the truck would have to hit it before it could reach me. The driver braked and swerved just in time, and that was when the police car came around the corner. The truck driver hurried down Main Street, the police car in hot pursuit. I sagged against the lamppost, breathing heavily.

"Are you okay?" I looked up to see Ruthie, who'd crossed the street.

"Yeah. He didn't come close to me."

"I'm guessing he was after you. I figured we were both goners if he was just out of control. Thanks for luring him away from me, but you didn't have to do that."

"I'm not a fan of turning my friends into collateral damage," I said.

"You must have really irked someone."

"All in a day's work."

Margarita came down the street. She was wearing her coat and carrying mine. "I thought you might want this," she said, handing it to me.

I took it and put it on. In the adrenaline rush, I hadn't noticed the cold. It wasn't freezing, but it was a bit chilly for standing outside in my pajamas. "Thanks," I said. "I guess I forgot about that."

“What happened?”

“Looks like the guy who came after me this morning—at least, a similar truck. He must have tried to break in, then when the cops got here, he went to flee, saw me, tried to run me down, then the cops caught up and he took off.”

“I hope they catch him. You’ll be a lot safer.”

I wasn’t sure about that. Ralph probably had at least a dozen employees he could sic on me. Catching this one wouldn’t do much good unless the guy was willing to talk and said Ralph was behind it. Even then, it was possible the employees were loyal enough that they’d keep coming after me.

I didn’t see any damage or signs of a break-in on the front of the newspaper office, so whatever had set off the alarm had happened in back, probably to my apartment. I dreaded seeing what was back there, but I also wanted to know so that my imagination couldn’t run wild. I didn’t want to go back there without the police, though. I wondered if the cop who’d given chase was Wes or someone he’d called. If it was Wes, I hoped he’d call to let me know what happened instead of keeping me waiting. If it wasn’t, he should arrive soon, so it was best for me to wait in front instead of possibly disturbing a crime scene.

It wasn’t long before the police SUV came back, this time without lights and siren, and stopped in front of the newspaper. The door opened, and Wes got out. “Did you catch him?” I asked.

He shook his head wearily. “Nope. Sorry. He was willing to take more risks than I was. A high-speed chase through the city at night when I don’t have backup is too dangerous, both to me and to potential bystanders. We’re spread pretty thin tonight, thanks to the game, so there was no one nearby who could join the chase or cut him off. I’m pretty sure I got a good shot of his rear plate on my dash cam, so I can

track down whoever that truck was registered to.”

I glanced up at the security camera over the newspaper’s front door. “And I may have some footage of his front plate, maybe even of the driver, from when he came after me.” I wished I could have said I’d done that on purpose, but I’d forgotten entirely about the camera. In the moment, all I’d thought about was getting behind that lamppost. I’d protested the cameras when the newspaper board had them installed to upgrade the security system, but they’d insisted that I’d been attacked or threatened enough to make it worthwhile. I was still a little uncomfortable with all my comings and goings being recorded, but maybe they were right about the threats.

Wes nodded. “Good. I’ll get that footage from you. Now, I’d like to take a look at your place to see what, exactly, he was up to when he tripped the alarm. When I got there, he was already in his truck and taking off, so I didn’t see what he’d done.”

“You’ll have to go in through the office, since I locked the apartment door from the inside—unless, I guess, he busted the lock.” That was when I remembered that I didn’t have my keys. I’d rushed off without grabbing them. “And I’ll have to run get my keys.”

“Your keys are in your purse, right?” Margarita said. “I’ll go get them for you.” She headed back to her place.

“While we’re waiting, what did you see?” Wes asked, directing the question at both Ruthie and me.

“Not much,” Ruthie said. “I was painting when I heard the alarm go off, and I was coming outside just as Lexie came running. Then that white truck came around the corner and veered toward us. I thought it was just out of control and that I was doomed because I couldn’t get out of the way fast enough, but Lexie ran across the street and it followed her.”

Wes turned to me, raising an eyebrow. “You ran across the street while a truck was barreling toward you?”

“I figured he was after me,” I said with a shrug. “It looked like the same truck from this morning. I thought I could give Ruthie a chance to get out of the way, and I put the lamppost between him and me. That stopped him.”

“Good thinking,” he said, nodding. “But aren’t there lampposts on that side of the street, too?”

“I wasn’t sure I could get Ruthie there in time.”

“Something I greatly appreciate,” Ruthie said. “I’m getting around a lot better, but jumping curbs isn’t yet in my skill set.”

“What do you bet that the truck is registered to that construction company?” I said. “Though it seems like a bad move to try to cover up for your crimes in a vehicle that can be traced to your company.”

“It’s probably registered to a shell corporation that owns the construction company,” Wes said. “You’d have to go through a lot of red tape to link it to the construction company, and by then they might have covered their tracks or achieved their goal of intimidating you into silence.” With a grin, he added, “Clearly, they have no idea who they’re dealing with.”

“Yeah, threats like this just prove to me that there’s something worth investigating. Innocent people don’t try to scare others.”

There was an awkward moment of silence—or as silent as it could get while my alarm was blaring. “Good pajama party?” he asked.

“Yeah. We were just getting ready for bed when the alarm went off.”

He eyed me and smirked. “Wouldn’t fuzzy bunny slippers go better with that outfit?”

“I’m wearing fuzzy socks,” I pointed out, raising one foot. “But the loafers were handy when I was rushing outside. And it was a pajama party. This was the dress code. I didn’t plan to run around downtown tonight.”

Margarita came running up with my keys. “I hope these are the ones,” she said as she handed them to me.

“I just have the one key ring,” I said.

“Now, open up, disarm the alarm, and hand me the keys,” Wes said.

I unlocked the office door, went to the alarm control panel, and punched in my code. The alarm shut off, leaving us in blessed silence. I’d tuned it out after awhile, and now that the noise was gone, I realized how annoying it had been. I mentally apologized to my neighbors and handed Wes the key. Fortunately, there weren’t that many people living downtown, just a few of us who had apartments with our businesses. Actually, I was surprised Jordan hadn’t come out to see what was going on, since he had an apartment with the office he maintained downtown, but he split his time between it and his parents’ house.

“I’ll go up and see what happened there,” Wes said. “Wait down here.”

When he’d gone to the press room to reach the stairs to the apartment, I said to Margarita and Ruthie, “Y’all don’t have to wait here. Go on home.”

“I’d rather not leave you alone, since that guy is still out there,” Margarita said.

“Ditto,” Ruthie agreed. “I wouldn’t be of much use, but Fitz is here with me.” Her service dog was a former military dog, and I had to admit that he was useful in a crisis. He’d helped save me before.

“Then have a seat. I’ll make some cocoa,” I said.

“I was here alone when it happened,” Jean said. She wore satin pajamas and slippers with fluffy feathers on them, though I didn’t think ghosts actually slept. “That alarm wakes the dead—literally. But it does seem to have worked to scare the guy away before he could do much harm. I was ready to give him a haunting he wouldn’t soon forget.”

I ignored her since I wasn’t sure Ruthie was in on the secret and I didn’t want to talk to thin air in front of her. I turned on the lights, filled the kettle, and turned it on. I kept a variety pack of cocoa mix among the coffee and tea supplies, for situations when tea wasn’t enough, and got it out. “I’ve got milk chocolate, mini marshmallows, and dark chocolate,” I said.

The process of getting out mugs and making the cocoa helped settle me down, and the first sip of warm chocolate restored my equilibrium. I hadn’t realized how shaken I was until I stopped shaking. I’d been threatened before. I’d even had people try to kill me. But that was usually the way I caught the bad guys. I hadn’t had to deal with the threat being out there, still able and willing to hurt me. It seemed that the only way to stop it was to solve the case, to publicly expose the wrongdoing. And, likely, the murder. If they were willing to do all this to silence me, then killing Jesse to shut him up and probably to turn him into a scapegoat was quite likely.

Wes came back to the office, and I asked, “What was it?”

“A brick had been tossed through the window on your door. It was wrapped in a note.”

“That’s kind of a cliché, isn’t it?” I quipped, even as I shivered. “I thought that only happened in movies. What did the note say?”

“I didn’t touch it. I want to get the crime scene team out here in the morning to see if they can get any evidence off it. It also looks like he tried to jimmy the door open. Based on the timing of the alarm and

when I saw him escaping, I'm guessing his initial plan was to get inside, but trying to get the door open set off the alarm. The brick was plan B—it looks like it came from one of the stacks in the alley. That means he might not have been too careful, so we may get prints or some other evidence. You should be able to get back in by tomorrow afternoon. In the meantime, I can see about securing the window. The lock looks like it held pretty well, so that's not a concern."

"I noticed that there's a piece of plywood that's just the right shape and size in the press room," I said. "This must have happened before."

"Yeah, your predecessor was even better at riling up people than you are—and that's saying something."

"And I was even better than that," Jean said, "But no one would have dared put a brick through my window. Though I suppose a lot of that was because most of the town worked for my father."

Still trying to pretend Jean wasn't there, I said, "Want some cocoa? I don't think there's that big a rush."

"It's tempting, but the sooner I get this done, the sooner I can go off-duty and get some rest. When I'm done, I'll drive everyone home. I'd prefer not to have any of you crossing the street alone with that guy out there."

"I'll hold down the fort," Jean promised.

We'd finished our cocoa and I'd rinsed the mugs by the time Wes returned. It was possibly overkill to drive across the street to Ruthie's place, but I was sure she appreciated not having to make that trip. When she was inside with her door locked, Wes drove us around to the back of Margarita's restaurant and waited until we'd made it up the stairs and opened the door before he took off.

"It's a good thing you stayed with me, huh?" Margarita said when we were inside.

“Yeah, I think I’d have freaked out if I’d been there when it happened. Actually, I’m still freaked out.”

“You’re welcome to stay here until you’re sure it’s safe,” she said. “I don’t like the idea of you being alone over there with that guy still at large.”

“To be honest, neither do I,” I admitted. And that meant I needed to crack this case.

IT TURNED out that Margarita’s breakfast tacos were as good as the dinner tacos she served in her restaurant. We were washing up from a late, leisurely breakfast when Jordan called me. “I’m supposed to go over to the police station this afternoon to look at those plans for Wes. Could you come along? I think it would go better if there’s a buffer zone, and since you’re working on the story, anyway, it would be good for you to see them.”

“You don’t think that’ll annoy Wes? He might be trying to edge me out of this.”

“With luck, he’ll blame you rather than me.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said with a laugh. “Okay, then. I do want to see the plans. You can say I barged in.”

“Would it be overkill if I brought coffee or snacks, or something? I own a coffee shop, so it’s not like it’s a stretch.”

He sounded like a teenager trying to plan the perfect first date with his crush. “This is really important to you, isn’t it?” I said with great sympathy.

“When you’re a brainy kid in a town like this and you actually make a good friend, that’s a big deal. I screwed that up, and I want to make it better. I could use a real friend, someone who knew me before I was a famous software billionaire, someone who’ll call me out when I need it.

I know I have some other friends around here, but I remember that they wouldn't give me the time of day until I got rich. Wes was my only real friend when I was a nerdy nobody."

"Bring the coffee and snacks. If he doesn't want them, he can share with the rest of the station," I advised.

"I'm supposed to be there around two."

"I'll meet you there, outside the station," I promised.

But just after one, Wes called and asked me to come by the station so he could show me the note that had been thrown through my window. I texted Jordan with the change of plans, letting him know I'd probably already be there, which made my presence even less contrived. I stopped by the restaurant, where Margarita was wrapping up the Saturday lunch rush, to let her know where I was going.

"Do you need someone to go with you?" she asked.

"It's just a few blocks, and I'll cut through the parking lots and alleys, so I won't be too visible. And then I'll be at the police station, which has to be the safest place I could possibly be."

I actually felt rather vulnerable as I walked to the police station. There were a few tourists in the downtown area, but the place wasn't yet the busy hive of Jordan's dreams. The alleys were even more deserted, and I found myself questioning my plan. I might have been visible if I'd walked down Main Street, but there were other people around. If my would-be attacker knew where I was, I'd be at his mercy. I kept close to the walls of the surrounding buildings and wove around parked cars, then ran across the street in front of the police station and breathed a sigh of relief when I was inside.

The desk sergeant sent me back to Wes's office. He had a collection of plastic evidence bags on his desk. One contained a brick. Another held a piece of paper. When I'd taken a seat in front of the desk, Wes

held up the bag with the paper. “This is what was wrapped around the brick,” he said.

I leaned forward and squinted to try to read it. I was good at deciphering all kinds of bad handwriting, but this scrawl was practically hieroglyphics. “Stay out or else?” I guessed.

“That was my best interpretation. It definitely looks like it was hastily scribbled in the dark, which confirms my suspicion that the brick through the window wasn’t his initial plan.”

“I wonder what he was planning to do, and what he’d have done if I’d been home.” The thought made me queasy.

“I’d rather not think about that.”

“But stay out of what? That isn’t very helpful. There are a lot of things I’m investigating. It could be anything. Whoever’s threatening me isn’t too good at it. Did you get anything from the plates?”

“Like I expected, the truck’s registered to a corporation. It doesn’t have any obvious link to the contractor, but I’m sure a bit more digging will eventually find a link. We were able to lift some prints from the brick and paper. It looks like he tried to wipe the brick clean, but then he had to grab it again to throw it. I don’t yet have results from that. I’ll need to get your security camera footage, but that’ll have to wait until a little later because I have something else scheduled. In the meantime, I’ll get together a police report you can give to the board for the insurance company so you can get that window repaired. My people cleaned up the broken glass as well as we could, but you’ll want to give it a good vacuuming before you go barefoot in there.” He grinned. “Or wear your fuzzy socks.”

“Have you tried fuzzy socks? You wouldn’t mock them if you had. Those were infused with aloe to make your feet soft.”

“Oh, aloe, of course,” he said. Whatever other quip he was planning

to make was interrupted by a knock on the door frame.

It was Jordan, holding a cardboard carrier full of cups and a bakery bag. “Reporting as requested,” he said. “Oh, hi Lexie.”

“Hi,” I said. “What brings you here?”

Wes groaned. “Stop trying to play innocent. I know Lex knew you were coming, and I’m willing to bet that one of those drinks is tea, so you already knew she was going to be here. Lex, you may as well stay and take a look at this so you can compare to whatever plans they show at that news conference.” He turned his computer screen so we could see it and said, “This is a scan. The original is in evidence. You can scroll around on it and zoom in and out.” He got out of his chair and motioned for Jordan to take his seat. Jordan appeared to fight a grin as he did so. For Wes, this was a big gesture.

I moved behind Wes’s chair and leaned over Jordan’s shoulder. I didn’t know enough about blueprints to have any idea what I was looking at, but I tried to note enough details that I might be able to tell the difference between this and any plans that had been altered.

“I haven’t dealt with this kind of project,” Jordan said. “But I should be able to tell the difference between this and whatever plan they show Monday.”

“Then let’s hope we can do that,” Wes said. “I want to stop these guys.”

“And I’d like to be able to live at home again,” I added.

Chapter Seventeen

We took Jordan's car—one of them—to the news conference on Monday since we figured the people who were trying to threaten me into silence would recognize mine. It was nice to sit back and relax on the way instead of having to drive, and Jordan's car was the most luxurious I'd ever been in. So, this was how the other half lived.

I'd never received any information about the event, but I'd checked with my counterpart at the county seat's newspaper and got all the information forwarded to me so I could verify what Wes had heard. The other editor was baffled as to why I wouldn't have been notified, considering that the bridge in question was close to Stirling Mills. I gave an innocent reply hinting at perhaps something being hidden and mentioning the death of the Stirling Mills resident who worked in the county engineering department. With luck, that would plant a seed so that it wasn't just me questioning the goings-on.

At the county courthouse, Jordan got out a bag of camera gear that any newspaper photographer would have envied. He checked through it all before we left the car, and I couldn't help but wonder if he already had it or if he'd bought it just for this occasion. Being a billionaire must be nice. It was probably overkill for an event that would just be people standing at the front of a room. Most of the photos in my newspaper were shot on phones. That was all I'd expected from Jordan, but "overkill" was his middle name.

The reaction of the county's public information officer when I

arrived verified that I'd been intentionally snubbed. She took one look at me and commenced doing a reasonable imitation of a goldfish, her eyes wide and her mouth opening and closing soundlessly. I smiled and said, "You must have forgotten to send the information to me, but that's okay, your local paper forwarded it all."

"Oh, um, yes, of course," she said, wincing. She had to know that another paper knowing they'd tried to shut me out wouldn't look good. She glanced at Jordan and blinked again. "Aren't you . . ." she asked, frowning.

"This is my photographer, Jordan," I said.

"But you're . . ."

"Exploring new career opportunities," Jordan said. "I like to stay busy."

The local editor, Dane Miles, came up to me. "Glad you could make it, Lexie," he said, shaking my hand. The public information officer was pretty much stuck at this point. She couldn't throw me out without that becoming a story in their local press. She silently slunk away. "And I didn't expect to see you here, Jordan," Dane added.

"I'm playing photographer today. But I'm concerned about that bridge. It affects commerce in our area."

"I still think it's odd they didn't invite you," Dane said to me.

"I'm pretty sure it was deliberate," I said softly. "I've asked some uncomfortable questions."

The county officials trooped in, and I took a seat. I recognized Mark Reed, the county judge, from previous news conferences, and he was joined by Tom and Ralph. In Texas, the county judge was the county's administrative officer, not someone who ruled over a courtroom, so he would have been the official where the buck stopped for the bridge project. There were all of three reporters there, which made my

exclusion even more pointed. Judge Reed stood at the lectern and said, “Thank you for coming. I know you’re all concerned about what happened to the new bridge. We’ll know more when we get the full results of the investigation, but in the interest of transparency, we wanted to release some preliminary findings. I’ll turn this over to Tom Storey, our chief county engineer.”

Tom stepped forward. “An analysis of the plans for the bridge reveals that there were flaws in the design itself that may have led to the collapse.” He clicked a remote, and a set of blueprints appeared on a screen behind him. “I don’t expect you to be able to read and understand these, but there are weaknesses here”—he gestured to the screen with a laser pointer—“here, and here. When the force of the water hit, it created a critical failure.”

Dane raised his hand and said, “Shouldn’t you have noticed this before the bridge was built?”

“I wasn’t here at the time, so I don’t know what the process behind construction was. My predecessor signed off on these plans, which were created under the supervision of deputy county engineer Jesse Martinez. Who, unfortunately, died last week.”

“Wasn’t he murdered?” Dane asked, glancing toward me. I nodded in confirmation.

Tom cleared his throat nervously. “I’m afraid so. I doubt it was connected to this, and it’s a shame because it means we can’t ask him what happened.”

“Those are definitely not the plans Jesse had in his safe,” Jordan whispered to me.

I raised my hand. “According to my sources, Jesse Martinez raised a number of alarms during the bridge construction about the plans being changed along the way. He believed this was why he wasn’t promoted

to county engineer when your predecessor left.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Tom said. “As I said, I wasn’t here at that time.”

“Are you aware that the police department found a set of plans for the bridge at Jesse’s home?” I asked. “They’re quite different from this. He was apparently keeping them as evidence that his plans had been altered.”

“Again, I wouldn’t know. I’ll turn this back over to Judge Reed.” He practically ran away from the lectern.

Reed looked somewhat taken aback, and he hesitated before returning to the lectern. “I am aware that Mr. Martinez was rather disgruntled about not being promoted. He may have been planning to blackmail the county over that.”

“Does that mean that there was something you could be blackmailed over?” Dane asked, and I made a mental note to buy him a drink sometime—though outside the county, since the liquor laws here were a throwback to Prohibition.

“Maybe I used the wrong word,” Reed said.

“Why would there be two different sets of plans?” I asked. “Maybe one to get approval for the project and to show anyone from outside and the other for a cheaper bridge, possibly with some kickbacks, so it could pass inspection as adhering to the specifications? Who was responsible for oversight?”

“We’d have to verify the validity of the plans the police found,” Reed said. “I can’t speak to those plans at the moment. These are the plans used to build the bridge.”

“Shouldn’t the contractor have been able to spot the flaws?” Dane asked.

Ralph said, “We build according to the plans we’re given. We followed the specifications to the letter, and the bridge passed every inspection.”

Which didn’t actually answer the question. “Why did the former county engineer leave?” I asked. Dane shot me a look that I read to mean, “Oh, have I got a story for you.”

“That’s not really relevant here,” Reed said.

“He left right after the bridge was built, after Jesse Martinez raised concerns about that construction process, so I think maybe it is relevant,” Dane said.

“I believe Jesse Martinez essentially hounded him out of office,” Reed said. “All of his baseless accusations were too much.”

“Are you seriously scapegoating a dead man?” I asked. “It’s convenient that he was murdered right before he was supposed to speak to me about his concerns about the bridge. That suggests that someone might have been trying to silence him, and the fact that you’re now using him as a scapegoat seems awfully suspicious to me. Meanwhile, I’ve been threatened since I began asking questions. What are you trying to cover up?”

“You can’t prove anything,” Ralph said with a snarl.

Reed shot him a glare, then turned back to me. “The plans are right there. Jesse Martinez was responsible for them. The bridge failed because the plans were bad. That’s what we’re here to tell you today. I don’t believe there’s anything else you could prove.”

“Which bridge did the county pay for?” Dane asked. “The one in the original plans or the one that was built?”

“I’d have to look at the records to be sure,” Reed hedged.

“I’ll be filing an open records request,” Dane said.

Reed said hastily, "Now, we've announced what we came to say. Thank you for coming. Good day." He, Tom, and Ralph made a beeline for the door, only to run into Wes.

The trio backed up, and Wes entered, flanked by two county deputy constables. "Ralph Chapman?" he asked.

"Yeah?" Ralph said defiantly.

"I need you to come with me."

"What about?"

"Do you really want me to say in a room full of press?"

"You've got nothing on me."

"The next time you want to intimidate someone, perhaps you should hire muscle that doesn't already have two strikes. You've sent someone to intimidate and threaten a reporter who's been asking questions. He was caught on camera in the act, and his fingerprints were on the brick and note that were thrown through her window. He was in the system because he has a habit of doing this sort of thing. He doesn't want to get that third strike that would turn these misdemeanors into a possible felony, so he told us everything."

"You don't have anything more than the word of a career criminal," Ralph blustered, but he looked scared. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and dripped down his face.

"I'm also arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Jesse Martinez."

"Hey, I had nothing to do with that!" Ralph protested. "I thought about it, but I didn't do it."

The constables took Ralph, cuffed him, and escorted him out. The whole time, Jordan was clicking away, so I'd have photos if he was any good as a photographer. Wes followed the constables. Tom and Reed

hurried out of the room. Dane and I exchanged a glance, then took off running after them, calling out questions. They darted inside a door, shutting us out.

“This has been the most exciting news conference we’ve ever had around here,” Dane said to me. “Are you the one he was trying to intimidate?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I didn’t actually have any proof when I started asking questions. But when they try to run you down and throw bricks through your window after you ask a question, that’s generally a sign that there’s something they don’t want you to know about.”

The public information officer caught up with us and said, “That’s all for today. You can direct follow-up questions to me.”

She escorted us outside, stopping by the briefing room to collect Jordan. I suspected that any questions would be answered with “no comment.” This news conference probably hadn’t gone as they’d planned. They’d hoped to pin everything on Jesse and ended up with the contractor being arrested.

As we left the courthouse, Dane suggested we go get lunch. “There’s a café that does a decent blue-plate special on the square. It’s about the only place in town to eat.”

“You’re speaking my language,” I said with a laugh.

The café was like something out of Mayberry. We got traditional meat and two sides lunches, with pillowy dinner rolls and pie for dessert. I was glad I wasn’t driving back because I was sleepy after all those carbs. “Do you have to get back to the office right away?” Jordan asked me after we said goodbye to Dane.

“No, not really,” I said.

“There are a couple of people in town I need to touch base with while I’m here. Do you mind waiting?”

“No, I noticed a used bookstore on the square. I can kill time in there.”

“Great. It won’t take long. I’ll call you when I’m ready to meet back at the car.”

I started to head to the bookstore, but I paused halfway there. I wondered if Tom would have anything to say about Ralph when he was away from his boss. He’d been truly surprised that Jesse had been planning to talk to me about the bridge, so I doubted that he had any idea at that time that anything shady had been going on. Was he being forced to cover for his boss? I doubted that a county engineer on his own could have pulled off a scheme on that level, and then there was the motive for the scheme. Was the county desperately trying to cut costs, or was the difference lining someone’s pocket? I’d be interested in seeing the financial records, but I suspected they’d be doctored by the time the county responded to that open records request.

I figured that Tom should be back at his office, and the public information officer probably wouldn’t be standing guard over the engineering department. Any word about keeping me out must not have made it to the receptionist at the engineering building, since she waved me on without even looking at me. Paula wasn’t at her desk, so I headed straight to Tom’s office, announcing, “I have a few more questions,” as I entered.

He jumped a good three inches out of his desk chair, and he glanced around like a panicked animal looking for an escape route. Unless he wanted to throw himself out the window, there wasn’t one. I stayed between him and the door. Less aggressively, I added, “I know you couldn’t have been involved with the bridge scheme because you weren’t even working here at the time. With that arrest this morning, it’s all likely to come out eventually. You don’t want to tie yourself to this sinking ship, do you? What’s the real deal, and why are you

helping cover up something you weren't even a part of? I'm pretty sure you know Jesse was honest. Why would he have made an appointment to talk to me about it if he was the culprit?"

"He may have been trying to throw you off. That's why he had the fake plans. He was going to try to pin it on the former engineer."

That actually wasn't an entirely unreasonable theory—if you didn't know Jesse. But based on the ghost I'd talked to and his character in the community, it didn't add up. He'd have had to be hiding his true self really well.

"He had to pay for all those barbecues somehow," Tom went on. "Have you looked at the price of brisket? And there's all the stuff in his backyard. Could he have done that on a county engineer's salary?"

I didn't know what a county engineer earned, but it would probably look like great wealth compared to a journalist's pay, so it would be hard for me to judge what lifestyle was appropriate for someone in his position. "Then why would someone have killed him?" I asked.

"The murder may not even have been related to the bridge," he said with a shrug. He'd relaxed a lot and lost his panicked air. "Are they even absolutely certain it couldn't have been suicide? I know he was a good guy, so if he had done anything shady, it would have eaten away at him. He may have had second thoughts about that interview and couldn't go through with trying to frame his former boss. Or he wanted you to be the one who discovered that something was wrong and called the police so that his family weren't the ones to find him, and that's why he set up the interview."

Which was what Wes said might have been likely, back when it had looked like suicide. But we knew it wasn't a suicide. There was no way Jesse could have drowned himself, then pulled his head out of the water and cut his wrists. "The evidence was pretty clear, according to

the police,” I said.

Then it struck me: How did he know it had been staged to look like a suicide? I’d left that out of my article, only saying that he was found dead in his home and evidence suggested murder. I knew the family wouldn’t have wanted any hint of possible suicide to go public, and that was the kind of detail the police liked to keep quiet, as it was something only the murderer would know. I didn’t know what Wes had officially released, though, and I didn’t know what the county seat newspaper might have printed.

I doubted Wes had released all the details, and there hadn’t been time for an open records request, so my senses went on high alert. Tom had been relieved as well as surprised to learn that Jesse had been talking to me about the bridge, and he’d just said maybe it was about something other than the bridge, plus he knew it had been meant to look like a suicide. Was I talking to the killer?

But why kill Jesse? Did he merely want to get rid of an annoying underling he might have seen as a rival? I’d worked in some cutthroat newsrooms, but that had never been literal. I could sometimes imagine an employee murdering a boss, but not a boss murdering an employee, unless there was something that needed to be covered up. I glanced around the office, noting once more the sports memorabilia. According to Royce, he’d been outraged when someone teased him about being so intense that he must have had something riding on the game. Gambling debts could get a person in big trouble, possibly big enough trouble to motivate something like embezzlement. If he had a guilty conscience, then knowing Jesse was talking to a reporter might have been enough to scare him into taking action.

But how had he locked those doors? Alicia had said she had relatives she didn’t know. It might be possible that he was a second or third cousin twice removed, or however that worked, and he had the

family trait, even if he didn't appear to have any connection to Stirling Mills. I wondered if I could trick him into using the gift. To knock something over, I'd have to move closer to his desk, and moving closer to a murderer probably wasn't the smartest move. On the other hand, I couldn't prove he was capable of being our murderer without getting closer. Before I made a move, I scanned his desk. I didn't think that knocking over his pen cup would be big enough to force him to react, but I didn't want to have to pay to replace a ruined computer if I knocked over his water glass and it turned out I was wrong about him having the telekinesis gift.

Instead of moving toward his desk, I moved toward the bookcase on the wall alongside the door. It held only a few books that looked like college textbooks. Everything else on that bookcase was sports memorabilia. "You must really be into sports," I said, trying to sound casual, even though the abrupt change of subject was probably suspicious, no matter how casual I sounded. "You've actually met all these people?" I peered closer at some of the pictures of him with sports celebrities. A few of them appeared to have been taken at casinos, which supported the gambling problem theory.

"It was mostly at autograph sessions to promote things," he said with a shrug. "Still, it's fun to meet your heroes."

I went to pick up one, "accidentally" brushing an autographed baseball, knocking it off its stand so that it rolled toward the edge of the shelf. I made a half-hearted grab for it as it fell and missed, but the ball landed in my hand, anyway, defying the laws of physics. If I hadn't known what might be happening and if I hadn't deliberately moved so that I couldn't possibly catch the ball, I might have thought I'd been lucky enough to catch it.

As it was, I knew someone else had moved it without touching it. Which meant I was very likely facing the murderer.

Chapter Eighteen

“W hew, that was close,” I said, putting the baseball back on its stand. I kept my hand close by and admonished it, “Stay!” before I stepped away from the shelf.

But as casual as I tried to sound, I must have given something away, or else Tom’s conscience was so guilty that he was paranoid because when I glanced at him, he looked far more furious than he should have been about a falling baseball. Even if he didn’t know I’d deliberately tested him, he must have felt like I’d tricked him into revealing himself.

“So, I take it you have no further statement about the bridge?” I said briskly, going back to reporter mode. “Since you participated in that news conference, I’m going to assume you were in on whatever cover-up there was, unless you can say otherwise.”

“I had nothing to do with the bridge being badly built and collapsing, since I wasn’t working here when it was built,” he said.

“What’s the contractor’s role in all this?”

“They built the bridge they had the plans for.”

As we spoke, I edged toward the door. When I reached it, I said, “Well, thank you for your time. Sorry to bother you,” and turned to leave.

The door slammed in my face. I whirled to see Tom rising from his chair. “You know, don’t you?” he said. “You’re from Stirling Mills, so you know it’s a town full of freaks, and you know what people can do.

You know how all those doors could have been locked from the inside.”

This was as good as a confession. I wished I were holding my phone so I could start recording, but there was no way to sneak it out of my purse without him noticing, and probably getting angry. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“You do. I saw it in your eyes when the ball fell into your hand. You set me up to make me do that.”

I tried a totally different approach. “Did you realize that this probably means you’re related to Alicia, Jesse’s wife? You’re a cousin to the kid whose father you took away from him. You are confessing to murdering Jesse, aren’t you? Let me guess, he caught you embezzling to pay your gambling debts—or you thought he did because you couldn’t think of another reason he’d be talking to a reporter. You didn’t know about the bridge then. I mean, you knew it collapsed, but you didn’t know that Jesse thought there was a problem there. I don’t think Jesse knew anything about the embezzling, by the way. You’re not the only one with a gift. Mine is that I can see and hear ghosts, so killing Jesse didn’t stop him from talking to me. He told me all about the bridge, even where to find the plans he’d hidden, but he never once mentioned you. You murdered him for nothing.”

His face had been flushed, but it drained of all color. “He didn’t say anything?”

“I don’t think he knew anything. But I wonder, is this why you were involved in the cover-up? Does the county judge have dirt on you, or did you take money that was supposed to go to the contractor to pay your gambling debts, and then when you learned there might be a problem with the bridge, were you using that to blackmail them?”

“You couldn’t possibly know that!”

“They spent Friday trying to threaten me, so there had to be

something going on.”

He moved toward me. “I’ve killed before to keep things quiet. I can’t let you ruin everything.”

“How are you going to explain a body in your office? Won’t someone find that a wee bit suspicious?”

“It was self-defense,” he said with a shrug. “You came here and threatened me, tried to kill me, and I had to fight you off.”

He was easily twice my size, so I didn’t think it would be very believable. He must have thought the same thing because he glanced away, then said, “Or maybe that bookcase just happened to fall, and it was a tragic accident.”

The bookcase near me teetered. The sports mementos in it began sliding, which apparently made him think twice. The bookcase stopped rocking, and he looked around for something else he could hurl at me or trap me under. An autographed baseball bat flew at me, and he laughed. “They won’t find my fingerprints on it.”

I waited until the last second to duck so that he couldn’t change trajectories—remembering what Steve did with the football when he kicked—but it still caught a glancing blow on my temple before it crashed into the door.

Other things in the office began flying at me. It looked like he’d forgotten entirely about making it look like an accident. He appeared to be counting on the fact that his fingerprints wouldn’t be on anything. I ducked and shielded my face with my arms, and while I was nowhere near getting killed, I was getting pretty battered.

I made it to the door, but I couldn’t get it open. I was trapped, and he was probably going to keep coming at me until he did kill me. Once he knocked me out, he could put me under a bookcase and then drop it on me. I hit the floor and crawled under the guest chair, which

momentarily shielded me from the onslaught. While there, I dug my phone out of my purse. My hands were shaking so badly it took me a couple of tries to unlock it—I'd resisted setting up facial recognition, but I was rethinking that now—but I managed to get it to call Wes. I didn't know if he was still in town, but I didn't want to call 911 because I wasn't sure how much I trusted anyone in the local or county government. Plus, he would know about and understand the telekinesis.

Wes didn't answer, so I blurted to his voice mail, "It's Tom. He's telekinetic. He did it. He killed Jesse." I ended the call and shouted, "Just so you'll know, I've told the police, so there's no point in killing me."

"They won't be able to prove it," he said, moving toward me.

The chair I was sheltering under flipped, exposing me. I bent over and covered the back of my neck with my arms, then braced myself for the next blow.

It didn't come. Instead, a female voice said, "Tom, what's going on in here?"

I peeked from beneath my arms to see Paula standing in the doorway, holding a key on a long string.

"Uh, stuff fell," Tom said. "It's her fault. She started it."

She glanced down at me, then over at him, frowning. "I heard a bunch of thudding, and your door was locked."

"He killed Jesse, and he was trying to kill me," I said, crawling past her to the outer office, where I got to my feet and ran. I reached the elevator, pushed the "down" button, and waited impatiently, glancing over my shoulder to see if Tom was coming after me. There had to be a staircase, but I didn't want to take the risk of it being only a fire exit. Then again, setting off the fire alarm might be a good idea, under the circumstances.

I took a step toward the glowing “exit” sign I saw over a doorway in the corner, but then the elevator dinged, and Wes stepped out. “I got your message, but it didn’t make a lot of sense,” he said. He frowned as he saw the condition I was in, battered and mussed. I rubbed a sore spot on my face and came away with blood.

“Tom’s telekinetic. He killed Jesse. I figured it out when I was in his office, and he realized I figured it out, so he was trying to kill me without there being any evidence he’d killed me.”

“Let’s get you out of here,” he said, taking my arm and pushing the elevator button. Unfortunately, it had already left this floor, so we had to wait.

Tom came charging out of his office, shouting, “Come back here!” He pulled up short when he saw a policeman in uniform standing with me. “She attacked me. It was self-defense,” he said.

Wes looked at him, then at me. Tom was somewhat mussed, but didn’t have any cuts or bruises. I was probably a total mess. “Yeah, looks like she did a lot of damage,” Wes said.

“You can’t find any proof I did it,” Tom said. “There’s no evidence of anything.”

“We’ll see,” Wes said. The ding of the elevator punctuated his statement. As soon as the door opened, he pulled me inside, then hit the button for the main floor. The doors closed just as Tom rushed toward us. I flattened myself against the back of the elevator, but he didn’t quite get to the door in time to stop it from closing.

When the elevator doors opened on the ground floor, we found ourselves facing a group of local police. “Good, you’re here,” Wes said. “He’s up there still, though he might have gone to the stairs.”

Some of the cops went around to the staircase while the others rushed into the elevator as we left it. The stairwell door was locked, so

they had to rouse the receptionist from her book to get the key. She didn't show any curiosity about the goings on. Either cops rushed in and battered and bloodied women came out every day, or she'd reached a point of being beyond caring about her job. Or maybe her book was just that good.

My phone rang as we left the building. It was Jordan calling. "I'm all wrapped up if you want to meet at my car," he said.

"I, uh, may be tied up for a little while," I said, glancing at Wes. "Something came up."

"Lexie, what is it?" he asked, sounding concerned.

"I seem to have caught our killer, so now there's paperwork. You can head back, if you need to. Wes also has to be part of the paperwork, since it's his case. I'm sure he'll drive me home." I looked up at him to see him nodding.

"If you're sure . . ."

"You know how these things go. It could take hours." And I felt weird about him seeing me like this. I liked Jordan, but he thought all problems could be solved with money, and him being at the police station was likely to make things uncomfortable for everyone.

"Okay, then. I'll e-mail you the photos. I think I got some good ones of the arrest. But are you saying Ralph wasn't the killer?"

"Doesn't seem like it. He did do the construction scam. But the whole thing is a very long story." I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to truly explain it to Jordan while he remained a skeptic about the supernatural. In fact, I wasn't sure how I was going to explain it to the police.

After I ended the call, I said to Wes, "I wonder what they'll be able to arrest him for. They'll see that his office is a mess and so am I, and his secretary caught him threatening me. With my testimony and hers,

will it matter that there aren't any fingerprints on the things he threw at me?"

"Possibly not. If there are any prints on those things, they'd be his. You didn't touch anything, did you?"

"Just one baseball, and he didn't throw that at me."

"Then at the very least, we've got him on assault and battery. But getting him for Jesse's murder may be more complicated. Arresting him for attacking you may give us a chance to get DNA that could link him to that, but I'm not sure how we'll explain the locked doors in court."

"He's an engineer. Maybe he came up with a way to rig the locks. Magnets?"

"We'll see. I'd love to nail him to the wall for this, but it always gets tricky when the supernatural is involved."

"There may also be evidence of embezzlement. That's what was going on, it seems." I explained my theory about gambling debts. "That seems to be why he killed Jesse to keep him from talking to me. Then he saw the bridge as an opportunity to get the money from Ralph. They must have schemed to pin it all on Jesse. So maybe Ralph will talk to shove some of the blame to Tom."

Wes shook his head sadly. "And to think that it turns out he was wrong about Jesse, so he killed him for nothing."

"We might not have found the embezzlement if he hadn't killed Jesse. He'd have clued us in about the bridge, but it would be the former engineer who got blamed."

"So often, criminals are brought down by their own greed or paranoia. That makes it somewhat satisfying when we catch them and it's their fault, but it doesn't usually help their victims."

I'D BEEN through the process of being a crime victim before, in somewhat similar circumstances. It seemed I had a knack for figuring out who a murderer was while I was alone with that murderer, who then tried to silence me. I would say that I should learn not to confront murderers by myself, but I seldom figured it out until it was too late. The killer usually said or did something while I was alone with him that made all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place for me. I supposed I needed to get better at hiding my "aha!" moment so I could get to safety.

On the other hand, when we were dealing with crimes involving supernatural abilities, sometimes the only crime that could be definitively pinned on the killer was his assault on me, so maybe the occasional battery was a sacrifice I had to make to ensure that a killer went to prison for something.

My injuries were photographed and documented, and I told my story at least twice, wondering if it counted as perjury if I left out how, exactly, Tom had thrown things at me. Was it a lie if I just said he hurled things in his office at me if I didn't mention that he'd done it with his mind? What would they think if they didn't find his fingerprints on the things he threw? Or would they bother looking for prints when there was evidence all over the office that something had been thrown, and I was covered in bruises while he was untouched? In between interviews, they'd had a medic see to my injuries.

I was waiting for one final bit of paperwork when Wes approached me with a paper cup. "It's probably not up to your standards, but it's hot, and while I know you don't take it with sugar usually, you need the sugar for the shock," he said, handing it to me.

I sipped at the hot, sweet tea. It wasn't the sort of tea I'd have usually drunk, but it was fine, and I wasn't up to digging a tea bag out of the stash in my purse and instructing him in how hot I wanted the

water boiled or the timing of the brew. I suspected he'd microwaved some tea that was brewed to be served iced, but it worked. "This is fine, thank you." A warmth spread through me as I drank. It had more to do with the fact that he'd clearly paid attention to how I took my tea than with the tea itself, I suspected.

"It shouldn't be much longer now," he said. "They're printing some things out for you to sign."

"I should be able to go home, right?" I said. "Everyone who was threatening me is in jail."

"Yeah. I doubt they'd be dumb enough to send someone else after you now that the truth is out." He frowned. "Do you think we need to get you to a hospital to be checked out, just in case?"

"They had a medic look at me. I should be fine."

"With all those bruises, you could have a head injury. You may need to be checked out."

"She tested me for concussion. I didn't have any of the symptoms."

"Maybe you shouldn't be alone for awhile. I'm sure Margarita can put up with you for one more night."

As much as I did want to return to my own home, I had to admit I was a little leery about being alone. I still felt raw and vulnerable. "Let's see how I feel when I get home."

"Okay," he said, nodding, but I wasn't sure I'd convinced him. "By the way, getting yourself attacked isn't really an approved method for solving a case. If you're going to keep getting involved, you need to work on your technique."

"Everyone's a critic," I said. "But at least I solved it, unlike others I could mention. Maybe you should give my methods a try."

Chapter Nineteen

Tom revealing himself as the killer on Monday meant I didn't have to scramble to meet my deadline. Between that and the playoffs being the big stories of the week, the next issue was finished in record time, which gave me a chance to get a jump on the following week, when the paper would go to press on Wednesday before the Thanksgiving holiday.

Steve invited me to a cookout at his father's house on Saturday afternoon, a sort of wake and tribute to his father for all his friends and an opportunity to use up all his father's party supplies. I felt a bit odd about being invited, since I'd never met his father when he was alive and hadn't been part of the gang, but Steve said talking to him as a ghost counted, and I'd caught his killer, which made me a guest of honor.

It turned out that I knew half the guests. Charlene and Royce were there, along with a significant part of the police department. Alicia greeted me when I arrived and offered me a drink. "Thank you for everything," she said, then frowned, "It looks like you really took a beating."

The bruises had faded to greenish yellow blotches, but I still wasn't going to be hired for my looks anytime soon. I just hoped that by the following week I'd be able to cover everything with makeup without looking like I was covering something with makeup before I saw my parents. I didn't want them to know the danger I'd been in. "It wasn't

that bad,” I said. “And at least it was enough to get him arrested until they can also find evidence about the murder, aside from what he admitted to me.” I doubted she knew Tom was likely a distant relation of hers, and there was no way to tell her without explaining how I knew, which she likely wouldn’t accept. I suspected that would only add insult to injury, so there was no point in saying anything.

She excused herself to go greet another arriving guest, and I tried to decide which group to join. As I headed over to Charlene and her husband, Steve saw me and waved me to him. “You look like you need a burger,” he said. “Get yourself a plate and I’ll give you one fresh off the grill.” I got a plate from the nearby table and returned to the grill, where he placed a patty on a bun that had been toasting. “Here you go,” he said, adding more softly, “Is my dad here?”

“Yes,” I said, glancing to where Jesse stood by the grill.

“Can you stay after everyone’s gone? I really want to talk to him.”

“Of course.”

As I headed toward the condiments, Wes arrived, and I bit the inside of my lip so I wouldn’t grin too much. This would not be the ideal setting for private interaction, given that we were surrounded by a good portion of the town. I couldn’t get Jean’s warning out of my mind, so I was hesitant to let the relationship progress too much and too publicly, and he seemed equally reluctant, so we were at a stalemate for the time being.

But that didn’t stop the flutter in my stomach when I saw him.

He frowned when he noticed me. “Ouch, those bruises still look nasty,” he said.

“Thank you. You’re looking good, too,” I replied.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I’m surprised to see you here. I know you don’t like crowds.”

“I wanted to at least pay my respects, but I may sneak out early.”

“Get yourself a burger before you go. Steve will give you a fresh one hot off the grill if you bring him a plate.”

I knew I couldn’t stick too closely to him in this group. I forced myself to mingle with the other guests. After all, as newspaper editor I needed to interact with the community. I told my story about Tom attacking me to some of the cops, and several other people approached me to comment on my recent articles about Jesse. All the while, though, Wes stood nearby, and I was constantly aware of his presence.

The crowd ebbed and flowed throughout the afternoon as people came and went. Wes stayed longer than I expected, but he left long before the yard began to empty. I followed him out to the front yard. “This was a bit much for you, huh?” I said.

“Yeah. It was pretty noisy. Are you heading out now?”

“I told Steve I’d help him talk to his dad when everyone was gone.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s good,” he said, nodding. I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d been on the verge of asking me to go somewhere with him.

“So, uh, I guess you’re doing Thanksgiving here in town.” As soon as I said it, I realized how obvious that was and wished I could take it back.

“Yeah. That’s where the family is. You?”

“I’m going to my parents’ place in San Antonio, either Wednesday evening or early Thursday, depending on how early we get to press.”

“Will you be back for the weekend? That’s when the Christmas stuff kicks off.”

“I’m planning to come back Saturday morning, so I’ll be here in

time for the lighting festivities.”

“I guess I’ll see you then.”

“Yeah.”

He paused, started to say something, apparently changed his mind, and turned to go, giving me an awkward farewell wave. I wanted to call him back, but this was hardly the place for the conversation we needed to have. I didn’t know if it had been the concussion talking or if he’d changed his mind about what he’d said the morning after all the excitement at Halloween, and I’d had second thoughts, myself. Maybe we didn’t need to talk about it. We could let things progress naturally.

When I returned to the backyard, I wished I hadn’t agreed to stay. If Steve had told me when he invited me that he wanted to talk to his dad, I’d have come later. As it was, I was beginning to feel a bit weird about lingering when I barely knew the host or the honoree. I was there long enough for the neighbor to call 911 three times to complain about the noise. Each time, one of the cops at the party went over there with a plate of food put together by Steve. I started to suspect she was doing it on purpose. She let her dog out into her backyard to bark, but that didn’t do anything to break up the party.

Finally, the place cleared out. I helped clean up, gathering the trash and empty soda and beer cans while Steve put away the leftover food. The sun was starting to set as we wrapped up, so Jesse’s ghost was even clearer.

“Is he here? Can we talk now?” Steve asked when the other guests were gone.

“Yes, he’s here,” I said.

“Dad, I want to thank you for everything,” Steve said. “I don’t know if you heard, but Lexie caught the killer. It was your boss, Tom.”

“Tom?” Jesse said. “Why would he kill me?”

After relaying that to Steve, I explained the whole thing to Jesse.

Jesse surprised me by laughing. “I honestly had no idea, but it explains a lot,” he said. “He should have known better to get tangled up with Ralph. Serves him right.”

“Dad, I don’t know if this is going to give you closure so you can move on,” Steve said, choking back a sob. “But I want you to know that I’m okay if you want to. You’ll always be with me, no matter what.”

“Is it okay with you if I stick around awhile?” Jesse said. “You can come talk to me. I’ll be here, even if you can’t see or hear me. You come tell me how the playoffs are going and how the Cowboys are doing.”

After I’d relayed that, Steve nodded. “Yeah, I’ll do that. I’ll come talk to you. But if you ever want to move on, that’s okay, too.”

“For now, heaven for me is here with you. At least until the Super Bowl. You’d better throw a good party then, though.”

“I promise,” Steve said.

I hoped that didn’t mean I had to come to a Super Bowl party. Maybe I could enlist Charlene for ghost translation services, since her husband was likely to be there anyway.

But I still felt pretty good as I left. Solving a murder, embezzlement, and a scam that resulted in a failed bridge, along with helping a bereaved kid connect with his dad wasn’t bad for a couple of weeks’ work. I deserved a little time off—but did criminals take the holiday season off?

LEXIE’S ADVENTURES continue in [Mystery of the Secret Santa](#), coming soon.

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About the Author

SHANNA SWENDSON earned a journalism degree from the University of Texas and used to work in public relations but decided it was more fun to make up the people she wrote about, so now she's a full-time novelist. She lives in Irving, Texas, with several hardy houseplants and too many books to fit on the shelves.

Visit her web site and sign up for her mailing list at shannaswendson.com



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